

INCARNATION, IMMUTABILITY, AND THE CASE
FOR CLASSICAL THEISM

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CONTEMPORARY evangelical theology has, in the heart of its piety, a need to express the profound involvement of God with his creation and, preeminently, with believers in and through Christ Jesus. In an age of oppressive secularism and militant atheism, we need perhaps more than ever to express the biblical truth of the Immanuel, the "God with us." I sense the problem with particular force in my daily work of teaching historical theology to young Christians strong in faith but as yet untutored in historical and systematic theology. The moment of worry occurs in the early weeks of patristic theology when the concept of divine immutability and its corollary, the divine impassibility, appear as aspects of early Christian monotheism. It seems to many students that the concepts themselves militate against the closeness of God to us in Christ, against the Incarnation itself as the place and time of God's entrance into our world and our condition. Nor is this worry just a symptom of untutored piety: it has been expressed, in a recent essay by Clark Pinnock, in the form of a fundamental complaint against the theological and philosophical synthesis that stood unshaken from the time of the early fathers, through the middle ages and the Reformation, into the period of Protestant scholasticism, and down to the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹

¹ Clark Pinnock, "The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore a Neo-Classical Theism," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (ed. Kenneth Kantzer and Stanley Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 37-42. In addition to the issue of immutability and incarnation, Pinnock also raises the issue of a doctrine of timeless eternity as over against a view of the temporality of God. For reasons of space, I have restricted discussion to the former issue while recognizing the latter as an important topic for future discussion. I have borrowed the term "classical theism" from Pinnock's essay.

In the nineteenth century, under the impact of Immanuel Kant's critique of traditional rationalistic metaphysics, a new perspective on philosophy was developed by Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling according to which 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.² The impact of this alternative ontology upon theology was enormous, particularly in Germany. Theologians like Dörner, Thomasius, Biedermann, and Gess all concluded that change, becoming, could be predicated of God.³ Exegetes and biblical theologians like Godet and Reuss viewed the Johannine prologue and the great Pauline teaching of *kenosis* (Phil 2:7) as direct references to an ontological becoming in and of God.⁴ Recently, the idealist paradigm and the kenotic theology have found eloquent advocacy in the theology of Jürgen Moltmann.⁵

There is, however, another, more pointed criticism of the traditional view of the divine attributes, specifically of the divine immutability, which arose out of the nineteenth-century milieu. The rise of speculative, idealist theology was halted by the radical critique of metaphysically determined theology launched by

² Cf. Émile Bréhier, *The History of Philosophy* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968) 6, 111-203, especially pp. 111, 120-24, 143-46, 195-98; and Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1965) 7, 15-28, 163-67, 171-74, 206-28. We ought also to note that the developing Absolute of nineteenth-century idealism is not the transcendent One of Scripture, but "the Totality, the whole of reality" in a "process of self-reflection" (Copleston, *History*, 208).

³ Cf. *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology* (ed. and trs. Claude Welch; N.Y.: Oxford, 1965) 9-18, 127-45, and passim. In all honesty, Dörner'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.

⁴ Frédéric Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (2 vols.; N.Y.: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886) 1, 269-71; Edward Reuss, *History of Christian Theology in the Apostolic Age* (2 vols.; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1872-74) 2, 63, 403-10. Reuss, we note, was quite moderate in his doctrine and insisted that the becoming of the Word implied no diminution of the divinity. This insistence on the integrity of divinity set him apart from the extreme kenoticists, like Thomasius, Gess, and Godet.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1974).

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Albrecht Ritschl and his pupils.⁶ Perhaps the most significant form of the argument was posed by Harnack in his *History of Dogma* and in his programmatic *What is Christianity?*⁷ Harnack held that the entire history of dogma was a declension from the original *kerygma* brought on by the hellenization of the gospel. The living God of Israel, the God and Father of Jesus Christ was transformed, according to Harnack's thesis, into the timeless, immutable transcendent of Greek philosophy.⁸ For all that neo-orthodoxy rejected the liberalism of Ritschl and his school, it held to the historical claim and militated against the rootage of traditional theism in Greek metaphysics. Both Barth and Brunner leveled a profound critique against virtually all pre-Kantian views of the divine attributes in the name of the gospel.⁹

Significantly, Pinnock's essay draws on both of these sources and links the critique of the traditional view of the divine attributes with a positive appraisal of theories of divine becoming and divine passibility. Barth, argues Pinnock, "was correct in substituting the term *constancy* for the term *immutability* . . . because immutability in the strong Greek sense contradicts the Christian faith and is subevangelical."¹⁰ The concept of divine immutability stands opposed to the scriptural revelation of the Word that became flesh:

How ironical for classical theism to claim that God is *unlimited, and deny that he is able to do the very things the Bible says that he can and does do!* *Changing is something God can do, and more wonderfully it is something God wills to do for the sake of our salvation. We have to say that the Greek idea of utter unchangeableness in God is false and misleading when measured by the Scripture.¹¹*

Pinnock militates against interpretation of scriptural references to

⁶ Cf. H. R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology: Schleiermacher to Barth* (London: Nisbet, 1937) 142-49.

⁷ Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (7 vols.; New York: Dover, 1961) I, 47-53, 107-28; and *What Is Christianity?* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1957) 190-227.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 203-5.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (ed. Bromley and Torrance; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957) 2/1, 322-50 and, on the problem of immutability, 490-502; Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Dogmatics I; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950) 241-47.

¹⁰ Pinnock, "Neo-Classical Theism," 39-40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

divine change or divine repentance as anthropomorphisms on the ground that such interpretation is not guided by the text but by a dogmatic preconception of the immutability of God. Texts referring to divine changelessness are, thus, taken arbitrarily as literal and texts referring to divine changeability, equally arbitrarily, as figurative.¹²

These arguments are far from negligible and their force must not be underestimated — any more than we can afford to underestimate or ignore the many theologians who contributed to their development. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that the structure of classical theism and its synthesis of faith and reason stands the test and survives the critique. Incarnation and the divine immutability are not contraries. The theological tradition was not blind to the seeming problem: indeed, it wrestled with the two concepts and manifested a certain agreement or concurrence. In the remainder of this essay, I propose to argue the case for classical theism and the doctrine of divine immutability.

I. *Defining the Concept of Divine Immutability*

Protestant orthodoxy provided, in the seventeenth century, a pattern of definition of the divine immutability representative of traditional Western theism and typical of the doctrine against which modern criticism has been directed. The Lutheran scholastic, Johannes Quenstedt (1617-88), wrote, "Immutability is the perpetual identity of the divine essence and all its perfections, with the absolute negation of all motion, either physical or ethical."¹³ Here we have the core of the problem — a definition that seems unremarkably philosophical. Yet the logic of the argument and its relation to the scriptural statements concerning divine changelessness become clear in the elaboration. The Protestant orthodox state three implications of this immutability: first God is changeless in essence, not "liable to any conversion into another essence, to any alteration, to any change of place"; second, he is immutable in his attributes: his goodness cannot cease to be good,

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³ Johannes Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica* (1685), cited in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, n.d.) 119.

his holiness cannot cease to be holy, his omniscience cannot cease to know all things; and third, he is immutable in his decree, his purpose, his promises.¹⁴ If the first portion of the definition appears purely philosophical, the second and third portions do not. They bear directly upon the reading of such texts as Num 23:19, "God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken and will he not fulfill it?" Or Mal 3:6-7, "For I the Lord do not change: therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts."¹⁵ Clearly, the text bears witness to an ethical, moral, intentional and volitional changelessness in God. Accordingly, criticism of the definition will be most pointed against the first portion of the definition, the basic ontological and essentialist assumption. Pinnock well recognizes that the most coherent critique is that of Barth, who would replace the philosophical language of immutability or, as Barth adds, immobility, with a language of divine "constancy." The scholastic doctrine, Barth argues, belongs to "quite a different world" than the biblical teaching of divine constancy: it belongs to a philosophical world in which God is regarded as "*ipsum ens*," being itself, and "*actus simplex et perfectissimus*" — as the "pure *immobile*" which cannot have "any relationship between Himself and a reality distinct from Himself."¹⁶ In place of this philosophical conception, Barth proposes a God who is immutable or, more accurately, constant and consistent in his life, freedom, love and activity.¹⁷ Barth does not here propose a changing God.¹⁸ Instead, he moves to replace an overly philosophical concept with one that allows life and activity in God:

¹⁴ Abraham Heidanus, *Corpus Theologiae Christianae* (1687), cited in Heinrich Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated From the Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 67.
¹⁵ These and subsequent texts are cited from the RSV.
¹⁶ *Church Dogmatics* 2/1. 492-93.
¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 494-95, 499-500.
¹⁸ Barth does, elsewhere, move toward a doctrine of divine becoming and even of divine suffering in the incarnation (cf. *Church Dogmatics* 4/1. 185-87); he nevertheless declares, even there, of the incarnation, "His immutability does not stand in the way of this. It must not be denied, but that possibility is included in His inalterable being." We must conclude, against

He is what He is in eternal actuality. He never is it only potentially (not even in part). . . . His love cannot cease to be His love nor His freedom His freedom. He alone could assail, alter, abolish or destroy Himself. But it is just at this point that He is the "immutable" God. For at no place or time can He or will He turn against Himself or contradict Himself, not even in virtue of His freedom or for the sake of His love. . . . The answer, therefore, to the question: "What is the immutable?" is: "This living God in His self-affirmation is the immutable."¹⁹

This view, continues Barth, "has nothing to do with the pagan idea of the *immobile*, which is only a euphemistic description of death, but is its direct opposite."²⁰ I would not deny that Barth's doctrine, here, is an adequate and eloquent reflection of the above cited texts: I would only make three observations. First, Barth's critique of the classical notion of immutability does not, in itself, provide Pinnock with a doctrine of divine change. Second, Barth has, I believe, overstated the case against orthodoxy by mistaking the implication of the term *immobile* and by pressing too far the relation between the Christian doctrine of divine immutability and its philosophical antecedent in Greek metaphysics. Third, there is an implied ontological component in Barth's own doctrine that brings him closer to the scholastic doctrine of immutability than he himself would allow. The first point is clear, the second and third need substantiation.

The scholastic notion of God as *immobile* does not translate into English as "immobile" — one of the many cases of cognates not being fully convertible — but as "unmoved." This is, doubtless, the Aristotelian conception of an "unmoved Mover," but it is not a conception which in and of itself implies stasis or incapability of relation with externals. Rather it indicates a being who has not been "moved" or brought into being by another.²¹ That God is *immobile* or unmoved in this sense few would deny —

Jungel, that God's entrance into history does not, for Barth, constitute an alteration of being (see Eberhard Jungel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976]; for a similar view, see C. E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978]).
¹⁹ *Church Dogmatics* 2/1. 494-95.
²⁰ *Ibid.*, 495.
²¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Madríd: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1978) 1a.9.1 ("utrum Deus sit omnino immutabilis") with 1a.2.3 ("utrum Deus sit"): "Ergo necesse est devenire ad aliquod primum movens, quod a nullo movetur: et hoc omnes intelligent Deum."

not even the process theologians who predicate change of God and certainly not Karl Barth or, we add, Clark Pinnock. Barth, in particular, has noted that God is "in eternal actuality" and never anything that he is "potentially"; the scholastics, too, not only the Protestant scholastics, but medieval scholastics like Aquinas and Scotus, argue that God is immutable or unmoved in the sense of being eternally *in actu* and never *in potentia*.²² We find the seventeenth-century Reformed scholastic, Johannes Hottinger, arguing in a manner quite congenial to Barth, "It is God's life by which He both lives Himself by nature perpetually *actiosus* in Himself and is the source of life for others, communicating it in a variety of ways outside Himself."²³ The doctrine that God is unmoved means precisely that he is the first mover who imparts motion, which is to say existence to all that is. In short, God, as unmoved Mover, is the eternal one who not only *does* but also *must* relate to all things.

This brings us to the contrast between the Christian view of immutability and its corollaries and the pagan view. Barth has called the pagan view an absence of life and of activity, a kind of "death."²⁴ This is precisely the point of separation between Christian doctrine and its philosophical antecedent, and therefore not a point at which the classical doctrine of divine immutability can be refuted. The point has already been made, by implication, in the passage cited from Hottinger: immutability, considered as eternally actualized life, is hardly stasis or death. The fathers of the fourth century already recognized this truth and opposed it to the highly Hellenistic and philosophical view of God offered by Arianism. The Arian, Candidus, argued that divine immutability directly opposed the notion of an only-begotten Son of God consubstantial with the Father: a begetting in the divine essence would be the destruction of the divine immutability. Against this view Victorinus Afer, one of the founders of the Western trinitarian synthesis, showed that whereas

²² Ibid., Ia.3.1: "quia necesse est id quod est primum ens, esse in actu, et nullo modo in potentia." Cf. P. Parthenius Minges, *Locum Datus Scoti doctrina philosophica et theologica* (2 vols.; Quaracchi: Ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1930) 2.94.

²³ Johannes Hottinger, *Cursus Theologicus* (1660), cited in Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 68.

²⁴ *Church Dogmatics* 2/1. 494-95.

all change is an activity, not all activity is a change. God, said Victorinus, is eternally active, eternally and without alteration begetting and proceeding in the divine essence itself. Since the divine activity is constant and continuous it implies no change in God: it is an immutable activity.²⁵

In Victorinus' argument, the Christian teaching of immutability is markedly different from the pagan view criticized by Barth. This contrast remains throughout the period of scholastic formulation. Not only does the divine immutability relate positively to the divine activity *ad intra*, it also relates directly, for the scholastics, to the divine activity *ad extra*, the activity directed toward externals. Whereas the unmoved Mover of Aristotle could and did appear as an uninvolved God, a deistic conception of a "watchmaker" who did his work and then left the watch to its own destiny, the unmoved Mover as adapted conceptually by the medieval scholastics is a God profoundly involved in holding in being the world which he has created. For the scholastic mind, creation and providence are only separable for the sake of theological discussion: a world always in potency and never totally in act, always contingent and never having its being from itself must be continually preserved in being by the creative act of the fully actualized, self-existent God. Over against the created order, the divine immutability implies a constant, unchanging creative involvement.²⁶

Our third caveat, the implied ontological component in Barth's own doctrine of divine constancy, brings us to a crucial element in the orthodox doctrine of divine immutability, the relation between immutability of attributes and purposes and immutability of essence. We have already seen that divine immutability does not imply divine inactivity or lack of relation to other levels of being—but does it imply an ontological dimension of doctrine not implied by Scripture and therefore "subevangelical"? This

²⁵ See *Marti Victorini rhetoris urbis Romae ad Candidum Arrianum*, in *Maximus Victorinus, Tractatus theologiques sur la Trinité* (ed. P. Henry and P. Hadot); Sources chrétiennes 68; Paris: Cerf, 1960) 170.

²⁶ Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologicae*, Ia.22.2: "Causalitas autem Dei, qui est primum agens, se extendit usque ad omnia entia." For a typical Protestant scholastic statement of the continuing, active causality of God sustaining the world and of providence as *continua creatio*, see Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 256-58, and Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 179-81.

issue is not simply a liberal/conservative or neo-orthodox/orthodox dispute. It is a dispute of larger magnitude which asks, as a prelude to exegetical discussion, the fundamental implication of the scriptural text. The question is whether theology must, as Barth argues and as Pinnock agrees, stop short of drawing ontological and essentialist conclusions from texts which speak of the ethical, moral, intentional, and volitional constancy of God or whether theology must move beyond an affirmation of that constancy to a doctrine of essential immutability.

On the one hand, Barth seems already to have moved toward an ontological affirmation when he argues God to be eternally actualized and never in potency. On the other hand, there is the question of whether or not it is possible to postulate an ethical or moral or intentional or volitional constancy in a God whose being is liable to change. It would seem that a change in being would imply an alteration of will and of intellect: if God can become something that he was not, then the constancy of the promises and, indeed, the laws made prior to the change cannot be guaranteed either in or subsequent to the change. Only a God who remains eternally and essentially the same can have a counsel that stands for ever (Isa 46:10) and a covenant that is everlasting (Isa 55:3, Jer 32:40, Heb 13:20). We conclude our discussion of the definition by noting the congruence of the idea of essential immutability with the scriptural teaching of the constancy of God's goodness and justice, of his purpose and his promises. This is not an unmitigated paganism within the bosom of the church. As Cornelius Van Til has stated,

surely in the case of Aristotle the immutability of the divine being was due to its emptiness and internal immobility. No greater contrast is thinkable than that between the unmoved *noesis noeseos* of Aristotle and the Christian God.

This appears particularly from the fact that the Bible does not hesitate to attribute all manner of activity to God. . . . Herein exactly lies the glory of the Christian doctrine of God, that the unchangeable one is the one in control of the change of the universe.²⁷

²⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974) 210-11. Substantial agreement appears in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939) 58-59.

II. *The Problem of "Changelessness," "Repentance," and "Becoming" in God*

Vindication of the doctrine of divine immutability from the charge that it is a pagan doctrine of a static or immobile and unrelated God does not clear away the exegetical problem. There are, certainly, enough passages in Scripture that speak of God as changeless to provide some exegetical basis for a doctrine of divine immutability — but there are, as Pinnock points out, just as many which point to divine change, divine becoming, divine repentance. Where Pinnock does not do full justice to the classical position is in his assumption that classical theism has simply chosen, on the basis of a preconceived and unbiblical doctrine, to read texts in which God is said to change or repent as "figurative."²⁸ The charge might hold if there were no texts in which God is said to be constant and changeless. But such is not the case. There is even Num 23:19, in which God is said not to repent. The issue concerns the logical and theological priority of one set of statements over another. Do we read statements concerning divine repentance as dependent for their meaning upon logically prior statements concerning the absence of change in God, or ought we to read statements concerning the divine constancy as meaningful only when qualified by a doctrine of actual divine repentance?

The question appears quite radically in the light of Mal 3:6-7, which declares both that God does not change and that God "will return" to his people when they return to him. Clearly, the return of God to his people is a sign of the changelessness or constancy of God toward those who keep his covenant: Israel, in breaking covenant, has experienced a loss of communion with God and will experience that communion again when she returns to covenant obedience. The text does not refer to a God whose presence is in fact everywhere somehow becoming absent and then subsequently returning. The "absence of God" is one of the ways in which Scripture refers to human alienation, without any hint of a doctrine that God changes location.

Nor does the text refer to an ethical change in God: God's "return" or repentance is predicated upon his changelessness.

²⁸ Pinnock, "Neo-Classical Theism," 40.

Israel is not consumed and she is promised the experience of renewed communion on the basis of God's ethical changelessness — "I the Lord do not change; therefore . . ." Indeed, the very nature of divine repentance of which the Scriptures speak is predicated upon God's changeless purpose and promise, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you."²⁹ There is a logical priority of ethical and intentional changelessness over the divine repentance. If this were not so, the divine repentance would be ethically meaningless and without relation to the divine purpose for Israel.

This logical priority of ethical immutability over references to divine repentance not only forcefully presses the conclusion that the change to which the repentance texts refer is in the creature — an interpretation that is not at all the result of a philosophical presupposition or a figurative reading — it also raises the issue of the ground in God of this inalterable purpose. Ethical, intentional constancy, as observed previously, must have an ontological basis. The constancy of the divine purpose, the consistency of the God who is what he is and will be what he will be, must also indicate a consistency, an immutability of the divine being. The continuity of purpose denoted by the divine repentance cannot be guaranteed by a God who becomes something that he was not. The issue is not so much whether Scripture declares ontological immutability, but that this concept is strongly implied.

Even if we set aside, for a moment, the question of an ontological immutability, there remains the issue of the logical relationship of divine repentance to those statements of Scripture which imply a kind of immutability in divine knowledge: the knowledge of God, as Hilary of Poitiers pointed out in the fourth century, is not a matter of "discovery."³⁰ When God is said to "know" it is not a matter of God discovering something which he did not already know; or, in a more scholastic way of stating the case, God's knowledge is never in potency. Unless we admit this view of the divine knowledge, we will be left with Marcion's incompetent God of the OT who, in Gen 3:9, really did not know where Adam was; who, in Gen 18:21, really had to "go down" to Sodom to find out for himself what went on there; and who

— if we extrapolate to the entirety of Scripture — invented the incarnation as a hasty response to a fall that he did not foresee.³¹ But if we take seriously the teaching that God knows our words even before they are on our tongues (Ps 139:4) and has ordained the incarnation itself, the center and meaning of all history, before the foundation of the world, then we must assume that he foreknows human actions. Divine repentance, then, cannot mean that God changes his mind contingent upon a human act of which he had no prior knowledge. In effect, divine repentance indicates a consistency of divine willing (and knowing) viewed as a change of relationship by a repentant creature. Divine repentance rests upon the consistency — the immutability — of the divine promises. That is precisely the result of the classical exegesis of "repentance" passages, not on the basis of arbitrary dogmatic decision but rather on the ground of logically prior scriptural passages indicating divine constancy. A God who repents as human beings repent not only falls short of immutability, he also falls short of omniscience.

But we still have not solved the exegetical problem. What remains is the question of incarnation as divine change, a question of an entirely different order than the simple issue of repentance. Here, we do not have (or want to have) any contrary texts: "the Word *became* flesh and dwelt among us." Pinnock has argued, literally, on the basis of this text, that "changing is something God can do."³² He cites Karl Rahner as arguing the underlying meaning of incarnation to be "God can *become* something."³³ The question now is, can this text be read literally or does the literal reading of the text indicate a change in God?

This is not a new question. The fathers of the church saw the problem and addressed it and so did the medieval scholastics. When the question was raised again in the seventeenth century by the Socinian opponents of traditional orthodoxy, the Protestant scholastics looked to the earlier literature and repeated the ancient answer: God did not "become" flesh in such a way as to cease to be anything other than God.³⁴ The incarnation means no alter-

³¹ Cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.25; 3.4 (ANF 3.316-17, 323-24).

³² Pinnock, "Neo-Classical Theism," 40, 42.

³³ *Ibid.*, 40, citing Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 220.

³⁴ Cf. Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 305-39.

²⁹ Gen 17:1-2.

³⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 9.67-72 (NPNF 2nd ser. 9.178-80).

ation of God's purpose (it was ordained before the foundation of the world) and no alteration of the being of God. God remains God and yet, according to his eternal will, joins himself irrevocably to our humanity. But is not this joining of natures, divine and human, indicative of a change in both? Jerome Zanchi argued as follows:

We believe moreover that the Son of God became man, not by any change of him into flesh or by a change in the flesh or by a confusion of the divine nature with the human, but by the sole assumption of the human nature into the unity of the said person; and, as Athanasius says, not by conversion of the divinity into flesh but by the assumption of the humanity into God; so that in no way did it dismiss that which it was, but assumed that which it was not.³⁵

Similarly, Thomas Watson states, "If the divine nature had been converted into the human, or the human into the divine, there had been a change, but they were not so."³⁶

The challenge to this point of view—we cannot, after all, call it the result of an exegetical word-study of John 1:14—comes from post-Kantian metaphysics, specifically from Hegelian ontology. As Pinnock says, "It is a *doctrinal problem*."³⁷ It is a matter of selecting an ontology and interpreting the text accordingly. Rahner, as a transcendental Thomist wrestling with post-Kantian metaphysical problems, and Molinann, as an equally post-Kantian thinker looking to theologians like Thomasius and Biedermann for insight into the problem of Christ's suffering, opt for the basically Hegelian ontology of becoming: God can become something he was not, man, for the sake of becoming more than he was. Incarnation in this view is not merely a divine act for the sake of humanity but also a divine act performed for the sake of God's own personal history, for the sake of his own becoming what he wills to be.

Notice now, that whereas the issue is not exegetical in relation to the verb in John 1:14, it is indeed exegetical in relation to the larger context of Scripture, where God is the one "with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17).

³⁵ Cited in Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 430.

³⁶ Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity, Contained in Sermons upon the Assembly's Catechism* (ed. Rogers; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 orig. 1692).

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³⁷ Pinnock, "Neo-Classical Theism," 41.

It is also exegetical when we raise the question of whether God's eternal foreordination of the incarnation (Eph 1:4) relates to God's will to save the fallen creature or to a hidden will of God, nowhere revealed in Scripture, to accomplish a major alteration in his own being, for the sake of his becoming, by means of union with his creation. Does God need incarnation for his own self-realization? This would seem to be the implication of the interpretation of Scripture in terms of a Hegelian ontology. If the scriptural ontology is "dynamic," it does not appear to be dynamic in this sense. It refers to a God who draws mankind toward his own incorruptibility, not by making himself corruptible, but by defeating human corruption in and through Christ. God makes humanity his own, without ceasing to be God: the becoming, in terms of the action, refers to God; but in terms of ontological change, refers to man, to the flesh.³⁸

As a historian (and not an exegete) I feel to be on fairly firm ground in these assertions when a commentator as impeccable as R. H. Lightfoot can write,

it must . . . never be forgotten that, by becoming flesh, that is, by taking humanity upon Him not as a vesture or as a disguise but as His very being, the Logos has necessarily abandoned, during the days of his flesh, all those qualities, such as universality or unbounded power, which are usually associated with the thought of the divine. . . . It is true that He is still the Logos, and therefore still the author of every man's being.³⁹

Lightfoot consistently interprets "the Word became flesh" in the traditional terms of *assumptio carnis* rather than in terms of a divine becoming. It is only on the basis of an arbitrary philosophical decision in favor of a Hegelian ontology that the language of John 1:14 can be referred to a change in God; and, conversely, there is no necessary contradiction between the text of John 1:14

³⁸ We might note, at this point, the traditional Protestant hermeneutical practice of conferring difficult texts with more simple statements of Scripture. In the case of John 1:14, where the verb might, taken by itself, indicate a change in God, the traditional method looked to texts like 1 Tim 3:16 ("God was manifested in the flesh") and 1 John 4:2 ("Christ has come in the flesh," cf. 2 John 7), and assumed that "became" ought to be interpreted as "manifested in" or "present in." The alternative to this hermeneutic is the arbitrary reading of difficult passages as indices to the interpretation of the clear and simple passages.

³⁹ R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary* (ed. C. F. Evans; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) 85.

and the doctrine of an ontologically immutable God working a redemptive change in humanity by the assumption of flesh, in accordance with his eternal, immutable purpose.

III. *Concluding Reflections on Immutability and Divine Involvement*

A few words need still to be said about basic points in Pinnock's argument and the relation of his argument to the very real need of evangelical piety to balance a doctrine of divine transcendence with a doctrine of divine involvement. "The *dynamic* ontology of the Bible clashes inevitably with the *static* ontology of the Greek thinkers," Pinnock argues, "so that when the two visions of reality are brought together, biblical teaching becomes warped and twisted and the resultant synthesis doctrinally objectionable."⁴⁰ This dichotomy, which is essentially the working hypothesis of Harnack's studies in doctrine and which was, more recently, buttressed by Boman's radical severance of Greek from Hebrew thought,⁴¹ is no longer historically or linguistically tenable, even if it did apply to the traditional doctrine of immutability. We have already seen that, for the fathers and the scholastics, divine immutability did not mean stasis or inactivity. In addition to this, Hengel has shown with massive documentation the interpenetration of Hellenistic and Jewish thought from the third century B.C. onwards. Where direct linguistic and/or philosophical dependence cannot be documented, Hengel points with confidence to "a common oriental background."⁴² On the linguistic front,

⁴⁰ Pinnock, "Neo-Classical Theism," 41.

⁴¹ Cf. citations of Harnack, above, note 7; and Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

⁴² Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 1.108 and see, in general, pp. 59-175. A still earlier cultural interpenetration, what Hengel calls the "common oriental background," has also been well documented: see, for example, Hans Gustav Giltner, "The Hittite Version of the Hurrian Kumarni-Myths: Oriental Forerunners of Hesiod," in *JJA* 52 (1948) 123-34 and Peter Walcot, *Hesiod and the Near East* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1966), both of which document the oriental influence on Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, pressing the interpenetration of cultures well into the eighth century B.C. The near-classic work in the field is, of course, Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (London: Collins, 1962), which argues specifically the linkage of Hebrew and Greek thought. Gordon's argument

Barr has shown Boman's arguments to be ill-founded.⁴³ And in the wings of debate, full of systematic import, hovers Tillich's argument concerning the necessity of finding a cohesive ontological implication behind the very texts of Scripture which the critics of classical theism have divorced from ontology.⁴⁴ The ontology of classical theism does not hypothesize a static, immobile God, but a God active in his relation to the world and active in himself: if this draws on Greek ontology, it draws on a connection made prior to the writing of the NT and, in the eyes of the tradition of the church, imbedded in the NT.⁴⁵

has been extended to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries B.C. in Michael C. Astour, *Hellenosemitica: An Ethnic and Cultural Study in West Semitic Impact on Mycenaean Greece* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965). It is quite impossible, at the present stage of scholarship, for any reason, be it historical or theological, to view the Hebrew world of thought as a hermetically sealed container that can be juxtaposed with the Greek.

⁴³ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961) 46-88, where Boman's argument is utterly demolished; also pp. 10-12, 50-53, 60-61, 72-80, where Barr argues specifically against the static/dynamic, abstract/concrete dichotomization. Barr singles out for criticism an article by Thomas Torrance, "The Doctrine of Grace in the Old Testament," *STT* 1 (1948) 55-65, where Torrance argues the inability of Greek to bear Hebrew meanings.

⁴⁴ Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955); in particular, see pp. 73-78. Tillich's position stands as a reaction against the exclusively existential view of Scripture put forth by Bultmann: we note the coincidence of the impact of the Harnack-thesis and related theories upon theology with the existential thrust of the Crisis Theology.

⁴⁵ Cf. Lightfoot (*St. John's Gospel*, 49-56) on the confluence of Jewish and Greek thought in the NT. Also see C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), especially pp. 2-74, where Dodd examines the names of God in both languages and notes the contribution of Hebrew theology to Greek expression; also, pp. 243-48 on the cross-fertilization in relation to Christianity. A clue to the reasons for presentation of the opposite thesis (Harnack, Boman) at the present time is offered in Leslie Dewart, *The Foundations of Belief* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969): Dewart allows that the use of Greek philosophy by the fathers caused no distortion of the Christian message but argues that this philosophical perspective no longer functions and ought to be replaced by an alternative philosophical synthesis. The problem voiced by Pinnock and others appears more a dispute between the modern mind and classical philosophy than an opposition of Greek and Hebrew world-views. Where I depart from Dewart is in the assumption that we have found an alternative that can provide a basis for the exposition of a biblical theology.

Next, the three-pronged point of Pinnock's initial argument:

How ironical for classical theism to claim that God is [1] *unlimited*, and [2] *deny that he is able to do the very things the Bible says that he can and does do!* [3] *Changing is something God can do.*⁴⁶

The first issue, that classical theism, which claims God is unlimited, ought not to proceed to limit God, overstates, just a bit, the orthodox or scholastic view of the divine omnipotence. Omnipotence was never intended to indicate that God can act contrary to his nature: God freely wills, by a necessity of nature, to be precisely who he is. He cannot cease to be good or just or Father, Son, and Spirit any more than he can cease to be God. There must always be some things that God cannot do, and there is no irony in that. On the second point, classical theism does not claim, against Scripture, that some of the acts predicated of God by Scripture are impossible for God. This issue reduces to Pinnock's third claim, where he differs with classical theism in his interpretation of what Scripture says that God can do. The third claim, in turn, reduces to a difference, not between Scripture and a traditional view of God, but between the traditional view of Scripture and the post-Kantian view of Scripture as interpreted in the manner of Hegel. And the choice of the Hegelian view is neither a matter of pure exegesis nor a matter of necessary conflict between the classical view and any given text.

We conclude where we began, with a problem of piety and with the yearning of the evangelical heart for a God who is deeply involved with his creatures. How can we speak to the heart of an immutable God, "without parts or passions," who is nevertheless passionately involved, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself? First, we may look to the immediate relation, emphasized by the seventeenth-century Protestant scholastics, between the immutability of God's transcendent being and the constancy of his purpose, the steadfastness of his love, the faithfulness of his promises. For many writers—for Mästricht and Pictet among the continental authors, for Charnock and Watson among the English⁴⁷—

⁴⁶ Pinnock, "Neo-Classical Theism," 40.

⁴⁷ Cf. Peter van Mästricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia* (Utrecht, 1714) 2.7.9-14; Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d.), 97; Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Essence and Attributes of God* (2 vols.; N.Y.: Robert Carter, 1853) 310-62 (Discourse VI); and Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 47-50.

the practical import of the divine immutability was the fundamental and unshakable trustworthiness of God. God might be said to repent as we change in our relation to him, but by no means could he be imagined to be able to repent of his will to have fellowship with his creatures. A God who is, in essence and immutably so, merciful and loving, cannot and will not turn from the objects of his love. If it is God's essential nature to be involved actively with his world as the very ground of its existence, there can be no end or abridgement to that involvement. The doctrine of immutability, as an ontological affirmation of the biblical message of divine steadfastness, becomes a basis for piety and reverent worship.

Translated into the terms of incarnation, the divine immutability indicates both an unwavering divine involvement and a consistency, throughout the history of redemption, in the working-out of the divine purpose. Incarnation was not a reaction on God's part, not a bandage placed as an afterthought on the wounded creation, but the purpose of God in the very act of creation itself. Nor is the incarnation a sudden injection of redemptive power into a world otherwise left to its own devices—as it would indeed be if it implied a change in God. Rather the incarnation is the manifestation in the flesh of a redemptive power of God present consistently, immutably, throughout the covenant history: it is the incarnate one who says, "Before Abraham was, I am." The Protestant scholastic teaching distinguishes between Christ *incarnandus* and Christ *incarnatus*. Christ "to be incarnate" and Christ "incarnate," much in the way that Calvin can speak of "the person of the mediator" at work throughout the OT.⁴⁸ That there is a temporal moment in which this purpose is consummated by the union of God and man in Christ in no way invalidates the immutability of the purpose—instead, the immutability of God and his purpose manifests incarnation as the fulfillment of what was promised steadfastly of old and as the redemptive blessing of which God can never repent in the future.

This involvement, inalterable though it be, occurs in our time and for our sake with so great a manifestation of love, mercy, and grace that we cannot but describe it as passionate. The pro-

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1.13.9-10; cf. Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 452.

found paradox of God (as Luther phrased it), revealing himself under the sign of the opposite in order to humble us in our unregenerate self-esteem, has been the wonder of Christianity from its earliest witness. The very fact of the divine immutability bound so closely, in Christ, to human mutability — of the divine impassibility bound so closely, in the sufferings of Christ, to human passibility — provided the foundation in the piety of the early church for an unqualified taking up of life's cross. Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to death, could praise the paradox of God receiving flesh to himself, of the impassible assuming passibility — because this was the preaching of an even deeper paradox, that death itself had become the way of life.⁴⁹ The active immutability of God, the ever-living and eternally unchanging interpenetration of the divine persons, translates into the divine willingness, without a shadow of turning, to make us partakers of that gloriously inalterable and living incorruptibility. We are most fortunate that in the incarnation God is not engaged in a work of self-realization but in the redemptive working-out of his eternal glory: incarnation is, in its immutable purpose, God *with us* and *for us*. Such doctrine, I would hope, will never be viewed as "subevangelical." Our piety must not falter before the first paradox, the involvement of immutable God, because on the first rests the second, the transformation of death into life, of corruptibility into incorruptibility.

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DRAMA IN THE MEETING HOUSE:
THE CONCEPT OF CONVERSION IN THE THEOLOGY
OF WILLIAM PERKINS

MARK R. SHAW

ONE chilly February afternoon in 1935 in the cozy environs of a Beacon Hill townhouse, Samuel Eliot Morison turned the attention of the members of the Colonial Society to a young Harvard professor of American literature. The paper that Perry Miller proceeded to read laid down the general lines of interpretation that have dominated the discussion of Puritan theology in general and Puritan conversion theory in particular for several decades.¹ "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity" with eloquent boldness asserted that the Calvinism of Calvin which had its essence in an "inscrutable God" whose arbitrary will and decree takes man by storm had been whittled down to the pragmatic Yankee God of seventeenth-century Puritans by covenant theology:

Even if the specific doctrines of Calvinism were unchanged at the time of the migration to New England, they were already removed from pure Calvinism by the difference of tone and of the method. It was no longer a question of blocking in the outlines; it was a question of filling in the chinks and gaps, of intellectualizing the faith, of exonerating it from the charge of despotic dogmatism, of arduous demonstration to assertion — of making it capable of being 'understood, known and committed to memory.'²

While he states that the process of theological decline does not occur until after 1630 he nonetheless follows the lines of English covenant theology back to William Perkins who "is in every respect a meticulously sound and orthodox Calvinist."³ Yet Miller

¹ Perry Miller, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," *Publications of The Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 32 (1937).

² *Ibid.*, 251.

³ *Ibid.*, 255. The literature on Perkins (1558-1602) has been growing steadily since the 1930s when Louis B. Wright complained that twentieth-

⁴⁹ Ign. *Eph.* chap. 7; *Pol.* chap. 3 (ANF 152, 94).