

INTRODUCTION: ARE EVANGELICALS STILL SPEAKING WHAT IS RIGHT OF GOD? (JOB 42:8)

After God's speeches to Job (and Job's subsequent repentance), He tells Job's friends that He is angry with them, "because you have not spoken the truth about me" (Job 42:7, NIV). Since everyone says something about God, the question is whether or not what they are saying is true, a question that the Bible here assigns some importance. Not surprisingly, then, given their deep commitment to the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture, evangelical theologians take the biblical picture of God very seriously. Yet even a cursory review of some leading evangelicals over the past several decades has shown a significant movement away from the God of classical theism.¹ As such, the implicit (and often explicit) claim is that the God of classical theism—that is, the God of Athanasius, Anselm, Aquinas, and others—is not the God of Scripture. The question, then, is which view is true: the classical or the evangelical view.

It would take an entire volume to discuss classical theism proper. As it happens, however, most of its aspects are mutually entailing,² so this paper will focus on how these scholars have reformulated the doctrine of immutability. While there is no doubt that they are attempting to be faithful to the text as they understand it, this paper contends that they have made serious biblical and philosophical mistakes in rejecting classical theism that, if applied consistently, entail an unbiblical conception of God.

It might appear that a simple analysis of the texts that affirm immutability would be sufficient, for perhaps one could simply discover in them the type or extent of immutability

¹ For a small sample, see Gerald L. Bray (*The Doctrine of God*, 1993), Robert Chisholm ("Does God Change His Mind," 1995), John S. Feinberg (*No One Like Him*, 2001), J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig (*Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2003), Alvin Plantinga (*Does God Have a Nature*, 1980), Jay Richards (*The Untamed God*, 2003), Richard Swinburne (*The Coherence of Theism*, 1977), and Bruce Ware ("An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," 1986).

² For instance, a classical view of immutability entails a classical view of impassibility and aseity, yet each of these entail the other two.

being pictured. In practice, however, this proves difficult, if for no other reason than immutability is taught for some practical reason, usually to emphasize God's trustworthiness. As such, advocates for any given view of immutability can argue that their position is consistent with the text. Therefore, this paper will work from the assumption that Scripture cannot contradict itself and thus whatever it says about immutability must be consistent with what it says elsewhere about God. In this case, God's self-existence or aseity will be studied; the argument will be that the evangelical notion of immutability contradicts the clear biblical teaching regarding God's aseity and is therefore incorrect. To clarify that argument, it will be applied to Bruce Ware's article on immutability, which will serve as a representative of typical evangelical scholarship.³ The paper will then conclude by considering two serious implications of the evangelical notion of immutability demonstrating that it is fundamentally at odds with the testimony of Scripture.

A SKETCH OF THE BIBLICAL ARGUMENT FOR STRONG IMMUTABILITY

The classical view of immutability is that God cannot change in any way whatsoever. Thus, He cannot change His character, His mind, or His plans. He cannot learn or grow, forget or be diminished in any capacity. He cannot be affected by anything in creation, and He cannot even be temporal, for that would entail at least temporal changes in God. While it goes without saying that the Bible teaches that God is immutable in some sense (cf. Ps. 102:25-27; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:17; Jas. 1:17, etc.), it is also clear that these passages alone do not justify all the claims that classical theists make regarding immutability. This is not to say, however, that the classical claim is unbiblical or even that it is not scriptural. The Trinity is an imminently biblical doctrine, but is ultimately derived from comparing several biblical statements. In the same way, the

³ Bruce Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 4 (1986): 431-446.

biblical statements on immutability combined with other statements about God, especially His aseity (the doctrine that God exists completely in and of Himself, independent of creation), necessitate one adopt the classical view. First, then, the biblical evidence for God's aseity must be briefly surveyed, and then its implications will be considered.

The Bible Teaches God's Aseity

Scripture is clear that God exists *a se* ("of Himself"), independently of creation. Three passages will be reviewed in support of this claim: Gen. 1:1; Acts 17:24-25; and Col. 1:16-17.

Genesis 1:1

The first passage that teaches God's aseity is Genesis 1:1. If "the heavens and the earth" are taken as a merism then the text teaches that God is the creator of absolutely everything. If, though, God created all things, then He is dependent on none of them. "Thus," Erickson says, "he could not have derived his existence from anything else."⁴ The logic is simple. If God is dependent on something, then He could have created it, for then prior to its creation it would not have existed and thus He, being dependent on it, could not have existed either. So if God created everything other than Himself, then He cannot be dependent on anything other than Himself, which is to say, He exists *a se*. It would seem, then, that to deny God's aseity would be to deny that God created everything in contradiction to Genesis 1:1. For by the same logic just mentioned, if God is dependent on something other than Himself, He could not have created everything.

Acts 17:24-25

A second passage that teaches God's aseity is found in Acts 17:24-25. There Paul says to the Athenians, "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 1:, 271

and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.”⁵

In these verses God is defined in two ways. First, He is the transcendent Creator of all things, and second, He is the imminent Sustainer of all things.⁶ If the first is true (God “made the world and all things in it”), then one must affirm God’s aseity for the same reasoning discussed above: the Creator cannot be dependent on His creation. Yet by similar logic, God cannot be dependent on that which He sustains, either. For if God sustains something, then that thing is necessarily dependent on Him. Therefore, He cannot be dependent on that thing, for then He would be dependent on something that was also dependent on Him, rendering Him essentially self-caused, which is a self-contradictory notion.⁷ Thus, to deny God’s aseity ultimately denies both that He is Creator of all things and that He is Sustainer of all things.

Colossians 1:16-17

A third text that demonstrates God’s aseity is Col. 1:16-17. Paul says,

For all things in heaven and on earth were created in him—all things, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers—all things were created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and all things are held together in him.

Once again, God’s role as absolute Creator is stated. More interestingly, Paul insists God has created not only everything physical and visible but also everything spiritual and invisible. Thus, Platonic realists like Plantinga who believe in the real existence of the “Platonic

⁵ All Scripture quotations NET unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Darrel Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 565.

⁷ The only conceivable alternative is that any given X and Y are mutually dependent (both sustaining the other), but that would require that both be dependent on something else. For instance, it is common for ID proponents to argue that a standard feature of design called irreducible complexity is common in the creation. On this view, X and Y both sustain one another, but they exist and are themselves dependent upon a larger structure. For example, DNA is replicated by special proteins, but those proteins are created from the information provided by the DNA. Yet both the DNA and those proteins exist within a larger unit called the cell.

menagerie” upon which even God Himself is dependent seem at odds with Scripture.⁸ For according to Paul, there is absolutely nothing that God did not create. Once again, God’s role as Sustainer is emphasized. Not only is everything absolutely dependent on Him for its coming-into-being but even for its ongoing existence. Thus, one sees again that God cannot be dependent on anything in creation—not before its creation nor in any moment of its existence—without denying the biblical witness to God’s role as Creator and Sustainer.

Aseity Entails Immutability

If it is clear that the Bible teaches God’s aseity, it should be just as clear that that it entails a strong view of immutability through at least three other attributes: sovereignty, simplicity, and impassibility.

Aseity entails sovereignty, which entails immutability

The sovereignty of God is beyond dispute, biblically speaking.⁹ While it is directly attributed to God in multiple passages (e.g., Gen. 15:2; 2 Sam 7:28; Ps. 47:2; Isa. 1:24; etc.), it is also important to note that it is entailed by aseity, which helps one understand both aseity and sovereignty. That the two doctrines should be joined together is not surprising. Plantinga writes,

Now I think . . . the sovereignty-aseity intuition . . . must be taken with real seriousness. Suppose God has essentially the property of being omnipotent and suppose that property is an object distinct from him, is uncreated by him and exists necessarily. Then in some sense he does depend on that property. For in the first place he could not have existed if it had not; its existence is a necessary condition for his existence. And secondly he couldn’t have the character he does have, couldn’t be the way he is, if omnipotence didn’t exist or weren’t the way *it* is.¹⁰

⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 35.

⁹ What is a matter of dispute is, of course, the nature of that sovereignty with reference to free will. This issue is discussed under the various theories of the providence of God. Which position one adopts on that issue, however, is immaterial to the argument made here, so it will be ignored.

¹⁰ Plantinga, 34.

Thus even evangelicals who reject the classical view of God see the relationship between sovereignty and aseity. Yet further, Plantinga's argument reveals that if God is dependent on anything other than Himself (be it an abstract property like *being omnipotent* or human acts) then those things upon which He is dependent have a degree of control over Him. Thus, aseity demands that God have absolute control over everything, since He is dependent on nothing. That is to say, aseity entails absolute sovereignty. But if this is true, the classical view of immutability necessarily follows. For if God is in control of everything and *in principle* (as demanded by aseity) dependent on nothing, then nothing can change Him. For if anything changed Him in any way, then He would be dependent on that thing for "the character he does have" and to "be the way he is." That is to say, a sovereign God who exists *a se* cannot be changed by anything in creation (living, event, or property) lest that God cease to be sovereign over that thing and cease to exist in Himself.

Aseity entails impassibility, which entails immutability

The above argument also naturally suggests that aseity entail impassibility, a doctrine which is highly objectionable to both process theologians¹¹ and many evangelicals.¹² Yet if God exists *a se*, then He cannot be affected by anything in creation. For to the degree He is affected, He is dependent on the thing affecting Him for His new state of being, and being so dependent, He does not exist *a se* after all. That is, aseity entails impassibility. Yet if God is impassible, then He must also be immutable in the classical sense. Again, the logic is simple. If God cannot be affected by anything in creation (via impassibility), then there is no basis on which to say He can

¹¹ See, for instance, Charles Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948); Jorgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1991), etc.

¹² William Lane Craig, for instance, says, "on the contemporary scene there are very few theologians who would defend [impassibility]. There seems to be no good reason for taking the biblical descriptions of God's emotions non-literally." See, William Lane Craig, "Divine Impassibility and the Crucifixion," Reasonable Faith, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/divine-impassibility-and-the-crucifixion> (Accessed December 10, 2013).

be changed at all. He is thus Aquinas' "first mover, put in motion by no other."¹³ Put differently, God is not unaffected because He cannot be affected; He is unaffected because He is the absolutely unaffected source of all affection.

Aseity entails simplicity, which entails immutability

Simplicity is another highly controversial doctrine among evangelicals even though aseity entails it.¹⁴ Put simply, God is not dependent on anything other than Himself, and everything outside of God is completely dependent on Him for its existence and sustenance. Yet any being composed of parts is dependent on something other than itself for its existence. Therefore, God cannot be a composite being, which is to say, He is simple. The major premise is, as argued above, simply a reflection of the biblical doctrine of aseity. The minor premise is self-evidently true, for at a minimum, "if anything has parts, then it is dependent on these parts for both the fact of and the nature of its existence, and this including God."¹⁵ Though the most philosophical, this is the most powerful entailment of strong immutability of all. If God is simple then He is atemporal,¹⁶ yet by definition that which is atemporal cannot change, since to change necessitates time. Put negatively, to allow for God to change is to make God temporal, which is to deny His simplicity, which is to deny His aseity, which is to deny the biblical witness.

¹³ ST Ia.2.3

¹⁴ See, for instance, William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (*Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2003), Jay Richards (*The Untamed God*, 2003), Richard Swinburne (*The Coherence of Theism*, 1977), etc. for some arguments against simplicity by major evangelical theologians.

¹⁵ Chris Morrison, *Reconsidering Divine Simplicity* (Master's Thesis: Luther Rice Seminary, 2011), 43.

¹⁶ For an admission of and defense of this point from an evangelical who does not hold to God's simplicity, atemporality, or strong immutability, see William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 29-32.