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THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE IMMUTABILITY AS GOD'S CONSTANCY

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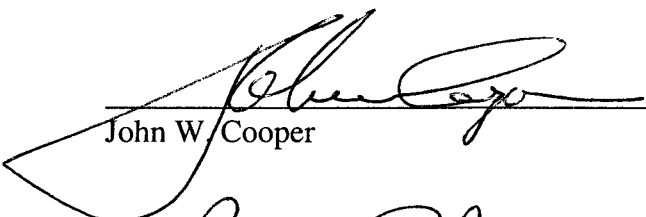
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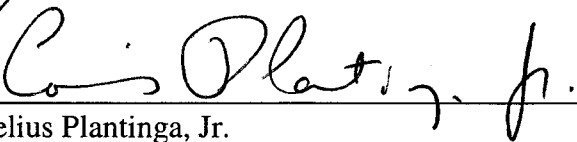
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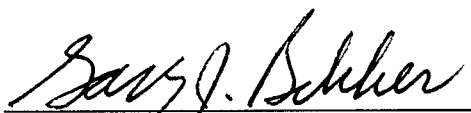
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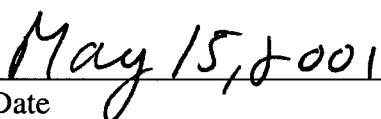
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To Gbeyana

CONTENTS

Contents	iv
Acknowledgements	vii
Abstract	x
CHAPTER ONE: THE STATE OF THE QUESTION	1
A. Introduction and Definition of Change	1
B. A Brief Statement Regarding the Doctrine of God's Immutability	4
II. An Overview of Modern Criticisms of Immutability	5
A. Immutability Is a Foreign Concept to Christian Theology	5
B. Aquinas's View of Immutability Conflicts with Other Divine Attributes	11
III. The Four Proposals for a Better Understanding of the Doctrine of Divine Immutability	15
A. The Kenosis Proposal	15
B. The Conception of God as Person	20
1) God's Dynamic Life Characterized by Personal Properties	21
2) The Implications of God's Suffering in Jesus Christ on Our Understanding of the Doctrine of Divine Immutability	25
C. The Process Theistic Claim That God Changes	29
D. The Analytical Theistic Claim That God Undergoes Relational Property Change	33
1) What Constitutes Relational Property Change in God	36
2) God's Relational Properties Argued from God's Everlastingness	39
IV. Conclusion	41
CHAPTER TWO: THE THOMISTIC DOCTRINE OF DIVINE IMMUTABILITY	43
I. Introduction	43
A. Aquinas's Argument for God's Immutability	44
B. The Immutability of God (<i>En Se</i>)	46
1) The <i>Potentia - Actus</i> Principle	47
2) The Principle of Divine Identity	48
3) The Principle of Motion	50
a) Transient Motion	52
b) Passive Motion	56
C. Can God Move Himself?	63
D. Divine Simplicity	65
1) Property Simplicity	68
2) Spatial Simplicity	70
3) Temporal Simplicity	70

II.	God's Relatedness to the World	73
A.	Whether the Scriptural Depiction of God as Creator and Redeemer Supports Absolute Immutability	73
	1) How God Relates to a Perpetually Changing World	74
	2) How God Relates to Petitionary Prayers	78
B.	God's Knowledge of Creatures and Contingents	81
C.	The Incarnation of God	86
III.	Conclusion	92

CHAPTER THREE: KARL BARTH ON GOD'S CONSTANCY 94

I.	Introduction	94
A.	Barth's Statement of Divine Constancy	95
B.	Post-Enlightenment Metaphysical Shift in the Understanding of God as Becoming	96
C.	The Theological Impact of the Enlightenment	100
II.	Explicating Barth's View of Constancy	105
A.	Constancy as Explaining God's Immutability	107
	1) Constancy Affirms God's Perfection	109
	2) Constancy Affirms the Unchangeable Life of God	113
B.	Examination of Barth's Concept of Divine Mobility	116
	1) God's Freedom, Love, and Life	116
	2) From History of Salvation	119
C.	Theological Advantage of Constancy over Immutability	124
III.	Brief Response to Criticisms of Barth's Notions of Constancy and Mobility	126
IV.	Conclusion	130

CHAPTER FOUR: EXAMINATION OF SCRIPTURAL TESTIMONY CONCERNING DIVINE IMMUTABILITY 133

I.	Introduction	133
A.	Scriptural Warrant for the Claim That God Is Immutable	135
B.	Survey of Biblical Interpretation by Some Major Theologians to Support Immutability	138
II.	Scriptural Warrant for the Claim That God Is Mobile	143
A.	How Some Theologians Interpret the Scriptures in Support of Immutability	143
	1) The Personal Relationship of God to Humans	143
	2) God's Answer to Petitionary Prayer	144
	3) Worship and Praise	148
B.	Scriptural Witness to Changing States of Affairs Initiated by God	148
	1) The Incarnation	149
	2) Procession of the Holy Spirit	150
III.	Evaluating the Hermeneutical Principles of Barth and Aquinas	153
A.	The Exegetical Conclusion That Immutability is Constancy	156
B.	Advantage of the <i>Via Positiva</i> Principle	159

IV.	Conclusion	163
CHAPTER FIVE: EVALUATIVE CONCLUSION		
I.	Introduction	166
A.	Evaluating the Criticisms against Absolute Immutability	167
1)	Moltmann's Argument That Since Jesus Is God and Jesus Was Crucified, God May Be Called the Crucified God	168
2)	Pannenberg's Charge That the Notion of Immutability Is Foreign to the Scriptures	169
3)	Hartshorne's Criticism of Immutability for Failing to State That God Is In a Process of Becoming	170
B.	Merits of Aquinas's View of Absolute Immutability	172
1)	It Affirms That God Is Ontologically Unchangeable	172
2)	It Affirms That God Has Ethical Immutability	173
C.	The Demerits of Aquinas's Concept of Absolute Immutability	174
II.	The Advantages of Constancy in Stating What Christians Mean by Immutability ...	179
A.	Assessing Barth's View of Constancy	182
B.	The Merits of Constancy	184
C.	Criticisms against Barth's View of God's Mobility	187
III.	How Constancy Affirms That God Is Immutable and Mobile	193
A.	How God Is Immutable	193
1)	God Exemplifies Property Stability	194
2)	God Exemplifies Immutable Existence of a <i>Continuum</i> of Identity ...	196
3)	God Exemplifies Steadfastness of Will	196
B.	How God Is Mobile or Active	200
1)	Along with His Essential Properties, God Also Holds Non-Essential or Accidental Relational Properties	201
2)	Meeting Criticisms Against Relational Property Change	202
IV.	Conclusion	207
Appendix: Theses for Scholastic Disputation		209
Bibliography		211

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ABSTRACT

A central claim of orthodox Christian theology is that God is immutable. That is, God exists and he is unchangeable. But there are two major problems with this claim: Can a coherent account be given of what it means to say that God is immutable, which affirms God's intimate relatedness to us in our space-time world of change? And, if it can, are there good reasons or arguments to show that God is not immutable? In response to the second problem, I deny that there are good reasons or arguments to show that God is not immutable. I maintain that such arguments as allot immutability to Hellenistic philosophy and claim that immutability is alien to biblical Christian theology emphasize only one side of the origin of this term. I show, on the contrary, that the Christian doctrine of divine immutability issues both from philosophical construction and biblical revelation regarding God. So then we have only one problem, namely, how to state what Christians mean by immutability in a manner that coheres with the relatedness of God to us in our space-time world of change.

This dissertation attempts to give a coherent account of what it means to say that God is immutable and is related to space-time beings. I think that failing to harmonize God's immutability with God's relatedness with us in our changeable states would result in a conceptual dissonance between these doctrines, which would discredit the Christian message for stating contradictory doctrines about God. To promote faith in the Christian God, it is imperative that our explication of the doctrine of immutability agrees with our religious conviction that God is intimately related to us in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

So I suggest that the doctrine of immutability signifies that God's existence and identity (that is, God's essence, attributes, and will) are unchangeable, but God's

relational properties, which are non-essential or accidental because they do not define God, are changeable. I say that God's relational properties are changeable because on the principle of relationality, when two things are related a change in relative terms of one must be reciprocated by correlative change in the other term. Now, God is related to humans and their changing states in this space-time world. Hence the changes that humans undergo in space-time world must correlate to God's relational properties.

I develop this thesis by stating, in the first chapter, some basic philosophical and theological objections against the classical theistic doctrine of immutability. In the second chapter, I examine the classical doctrine of immutability, specifically St. Thomas Aquinas's claim that God is *altogether* unchangeable. I raise the question of whether the classical or thomistic view of immutability renders God too strict and absolute, such that we cannot meaningfully say that God is related to humans in their changeable states of existence. In chapter three, I enlist Barth's explication of immutability as God's constancy. I endorse Barth's claim that God is self-mobile in his relations with space-time beings. Chapter four matches the Thomistic and the Barthian views of immutability with the Scriptural portrait of God to ascertain whether Aquinas and Barth represent God in a manner that fits the Scriptural portrait and our religious experience of God. In chapter five, I combine Aquinas's two theses that God is unchangeable and unmovable with Barth's claim that God is mobile resulting in a potent synergy that stipulates the constancy of God's existence and identity and change in God's relational properties.

CHAPTER ONE

THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

A. Introduction and Definition of Change

What does the doctrine of divine immutability intend to teach about God?

Restricting our attention for now to the Christian theological usage of the term immutability, two meanings emerge. The first meaning states that the doctrine of divine immutability shows God's being as a continuum, an eternal constancy of substance, attributes, and will. Let us call this "soft" immutability or constancy. The second meaning states simply that the doctrine of immutability denies any and all changes of God. Let us call this "strong" or absolute immutability. Although the first meaning of immutability is assumed or implied in many theological discourses, it is the second meaning of immutability that has received much expression and is subject of many attacks on the orthodox Christian doctrine of immutability. St. Thomas Aquinas is often credited with raising the second meaning of the doctrine of immutability to its theoretical prominence in his contention that the doctrine of divine immutability affirms that God is *altogether* unchangeable.¹ That is, God cannot change the perfect state of his existence or move himself or be moved by another thing to become what he is not.

¹St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a. 9. 1; Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.16.

But since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a renewed interest in the existential or active involvement of God in our perpetually changing world has led several contemporary Christian theologians to question Aquinas's understanding of immutability. Karl Barth, a leading modern theologian, insists that the Scriptures reveal God as actively involved in the temporal changes that occur on earth such that God is at least mobile. Thus broadly stated, the theological problem that this dissertation deals with is whether Aquinas's view of immutability, or whether Barth's view of immutability that embraces divine mobility, better states the truth about God. I will argue that although Aquinas's theory of immutability describes what the Bible asserts regarding God's nature, it states this in a strong language such that it has attracted some objections especially with respect to its denial that God is really related to our space-time world. I suggest that, perhaps, we can overcome this strong language of Aquinas regarding immutability by incorporating Barth's view of constancy into our understanding of immutability, especially because constancy allows us to state in simpler (modern) terms the relatedness of God to us in the space-time world.

In this first chapter, I will state and analyze the basic issues in the modern debate over the meaning of divine immutability. I will present the two main objections to Aquinas's notion of immutability and examine the four proposals that modern theologians have offered to resolve the difficulties in Aquinas's view of immutability. I will conclude the chapter by stating why I think that Barth's theory of constancy approximates the true meaning of God's immutability and defeats criticisms against Aquinas's view of immutability; hence it should be incorporated into our Christian understanding of immutability. The goal of this chapter is, therefore, to introduce the central points of contention in the modern debate over the correct meaning of immutability. I will present a detailed exposition of Aquinas's view of immutability in chapter two. In chapter three, I will examine Barth's theory of constancy and his criticism of Aquinas's preclusion of mobility from God. I will judge whether Barth is right in seeing Aquinas's preclusion of mobility

from God as implying that God is dead. In chapter four, I will exposit the Scriptures to ascertain whether what they reveal about God is better rendered by Aquinas's strong immutability or by Barth's softer view of constancy. I will conclude, in chapter five, with an assessment of the adequacy of the proposed solutions for a healthy conception of God and for our religious expression of faith in the Christian God. I will draw from the findings of some Christian analytical theologians to argue that the doctrine of divine immutability intends to express the unceasing identity of God who nonetheless changes or moves with respect to his relational properties in his active involvement with spatio-temporal beings.

But before examining the arguments for and against immutability, I should first state the definition of immutability. Since the concept of immutability negates change of God, I shall first state what it means for something to change and then deduce what it means to deny that God changes. Let us call this the Standard Account of Change (SAC): *A thing changes in respect to X if it has an X (or X-property) at one time, which it lacks at another.*² For instance, a thing changes with respect to color if it had color property at one time which it lacks at a later time. Time is a crucial notion in SAC because it is the fundamental principle for motion and alteration. SAC is, however, precluded from God by the classical or Thomistic doctrine of divine immutability.³ So the classical or Thomistic doctrine of immutability denies what SAC states.

That is, for Aquinas, immutability is the claim that at no *time* does God change or alter his being, will, or essential properties (attributes) that define God. But, I shall hold

²Here time shall not only be understood in the Aristotelian sense of "number of movement by before and after" as these are found in the motions of the heavens (See: Aristotle, *Physics*, IV.11 (220a25)), for this sort of time does not apply to God. But also we shall understand time in its theological sense of that which has (knows and causes) a before and an after to occur in any manner at all. As we speak, for example, of time in measuring the simple conception of our understanding in their succession. This notion of time need not be limited to spatio-temporality because it is not associated with continuous motions in the heavens. Thus we say that God's eternity does include his possession of the knowledge of the present, and future events. Nothing escapes God's knowledge (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5. 6. 10).

³St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a. 10. 1.

provisionally that even the classical or Thomistic doctrine of immutability permits the claim that God changes with respect to his relational properties, which do not define God. I will show, in chapter two, that Aquinas can be accommodated to the view of soft immutability, which stipulates relational property change to God while also affirming that God's being, will, and essential properties or attributes are altogether unchangeable. So, I concede in this dissertation that although the recent debates over the correct meaning of immutability have heightened our understanding of God's relation to the world, I do not think they have dislodged the classical or Thomistic view of immutability, properly understood.

I now turn to the presentation of the main issues raised in the modern debate over the correct meaning of the doctrine of divine immutability.

B. A Brief Statement Regarding the Doctrine of God's Immutability

Perhaps I should state at the off-set that the doctrine of God's Immutability is well-entrenched in the orthodox Christian tradition, and it has the double honor of issuing from philosophical reflection and from divine revelation. Clearly the Bible ascribes some form of immutability to God, as in Malachi 3:6 "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O! sons of Jacob, are not consumed;" and James 1:17 "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." These texts contrast the God of Israel who is steadfast and faithful to his promises with the pagan gods who are fickle and capricious and with human beings who break their promises and capriciously change their minds. No such fickle flickering of human inconsistency characterizes God. God can be trusted because he is always and eternally the same.⁴

⁴Texts like Genesis 6:5-7; Numbers 23:19; I Samuel 15:11, 29 can be read as affirming a change of mind in God. Such a reading is, however, vigorously rejected by classical theists like Philo, *Quod Deus Immutabilis Sit*, 20-23 and St. Augustine *De Civitate Dei*, XV, 24-25. Here I offer only a brief treatment of these important biblical texts, but I shall examine them in detail in chapter four.

This, therefore, is what orthodox Christians understand the doctrine of divine immutability and biblical writers as stating about God. But I must note that Biblical writers did not intend to give a philosophical or logical explication of immutability or any of God's attributes. Their focus was primarily historical and practical -- this is especially true of the Old Testament writers. Still they did maintain that God is, in some way or another, immutable. But many modern theologians do not think that the biblical writers intended to teach that God is *altogether* immutable, as Aquinas claims. So they offer these objections to Aquinas's doctrine of immutability.

II. An Overview of Modern Criticisms of Immutability

A. Immutability is a Foreign Concept to Christian Theology.

Some modern theologians object to Aquinas's doctrine of immutability by arguing that immutability is itself a foreign concept to Christian theology. Such theologians as Lester J. Kuyper and Roland J. Teske contend that the whole notion of God's immutability is a foreign import from Hellenistic philosophy into Christian theology, and it lacks biblical support. Rather, says Kuyper, "the Scriptures speak about God who walks in the garden, who comes down to see the wickedness of the cities of the plain, who stretches out his arm, who inclines his ear, who smells the sacrifice, who writes with his finger or who talks with his voice from the mountain."⁵ And Kuyper adds that the Scriptural passages which describe God as having feelings, emotions, compassion, love, hatred, wrath, patience and repentance, remain an embarrassment to classical theists because these passages undermine the classical theistic claim of divine immutability. For this reason, says Kuyper, classical theists usually either ignore the Scriptural passages which state that God suffers and is grieved or they avoid the obvious meaning of these passages in their explication of immutability. Instead, Kuyper alleges that they exegete biblical passages about God's repentance as speaking figuratively. Therefore, they need not be taken literally, just as one

⁵Lester J. Kuyper, "The Repentance of God," *Reformed Review* 18 (1965): 3-16.

does not believe that God has a body because the Scriptures say God delivered Israel with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.⁶ Kuyper even indicts the reformers for allowing their exegesis to follow the patterns and presuppositions of medieval scholasticism to the extent that they balked at any suggestion of change in God. But Kuyper credits recent studies in biblical theology with treating the data of the Bible rightly by insisting that it is more appropriate to believe that God is passible than to affirm his impassability.⁷

Similarly, Roland J. Teske maintains that the biblical writers were not concerned with making metaphysical statements about God's unchangeableness. Rather they were concerned with showing that God persists or his existence continues indefinitely without subject to corruption or death, as are material objects. According to Teske, it was only when Christian theologians began reflecting on the importance of such Bible passages, in an attempt to cast the revealed truth about God into a system of theology, that they started harmonizing the claims of the Scriptures with the philosophical claims about God. Teske says:

If Augustine became certain that God was immutable prior to his contact with the *libri Platoniorum*, there is still no doubt that his reading these books and learning from them enabled him to conceive of God as incorporeal, immutable, and eternal. When he speaks of the things that he found in those books, he explicitly mentions immutability and eternity.⁸

But the mere charge that early Christian fathers utilized philosophical claims about God in the process of systematizing Christian theology does not constitute a harm to the Christian concept of God. Even when viewed in light of the distinction that many theologians draw

⁶Kuyper, "The Repentance of God," p. 12.

⁷Kuyper, "The Repentance of God," pp. 4-5. For support, Kuyper appeals to: Gerald Wondra, "The Pathos of God," *Reformed Review* (Dec., 1964): 28-35; T. E. Pollard, "The Impassability of God," *Scottish Theological Journal* (1955): 353-364.

⁸Roland J. Teske, "Divine Immutability in Saint Augustine," *The New Schoolman* 63 (May, 1986): 246-247. See, William E. Mann, "Immutability and Predication: What Aristotle Taught Philo and Augustine," *Philosophy of Religion* 22 (1987): 21-39; Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); Albrecht Ritschl, "Theology and Metaphysics" in *Three Essays*, ed. & trans. Philip Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

between the God of Greek metaphysics and the God of the Bible, no evidence exists to suggest that a borrowing of concepts from Greek metaphysics to explain the Christian God necessarily arrogates erroneous notions to the Christian God. Or that Greek metaphysics distorts the true biblical depiction of God more so than many of the concepts we are borrowing from modern philosophies. Still, Nicholas Wolterstorff holds that, by defining immutability in Platonic and Aristotelian categories, theologians like Augustine and, later, Aquinas had deviated from the true biblical concept of God. Wolterstorff accuses these theologians of losing the truly Hebraic and Christian God who acts in human history and substituting a passive, stoic factor within reality.⁹

So it is a fact that several modern theologians and philosophers find the arguments for God's immutability, or just the conception of God's immutability, foreign to the teachings of the Scriptures. But I do not see why the mere use of a philosophical concept in elucidating God's immutability may be sufficient grounds for rejecting immutability. Besides, the Scriptures do indeed at times appear to deny the predication of change to God. So, there may be some truth to the claim that the early church fathers used Hellenistic philosophical concepts to elucidate the doctrine of immutability. But these objectors may be missing the important point, namely, that of stating and elucidating what the Bible means when, at times, it appears to deny the predication of SAC to God.

A milder version of this objection to Aquinas's doctrine of immutability acknowledges that the Bible teaches that God is immutable and it permits the derivation of immutability from philosophy. But it argues that both Platonism and Aristotelianism (from which Aquinas drew) are products of archaic philosophy which no longer speaks

⁹Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in *God and the Good*, eds. Clifford Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 181. See: Clark Pinnock, "The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore a Neo-Classical Theism," *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, eds. Kenneth Kantzer and Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 37-42; Adrio König, *Here Am I: A Believer's Reflection on God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); Kuyper, "The Suffering and the Repentance of God," pp. 257-277; G. Watson, "The Problem of the Unchanging in Greek Philosophy," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 27 (1985): 57-69.

meaningfully to modern thinkers. So, instead of Platonism and Aristotelianism, they maintain that a new philosophical perspective has emerged with Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling, derived from Kant's critique of traditional rationalistic metaphysics, which has replaced the ancient ontology of pure Being with a new ontology of the Becoming of being. They then suggest that modern philosophers and theologians ought no longer readily identify God with the Platonic or Aristotelian concept of absolute Idea or pure Being, but to conceive God in the modern ontological concept of becoming. In theology, the difference between the philosophical perception of Being in the medieval and the modern era, between the absolutists of the medieval age and the idealists of the modern age, regarding God's being was first stated by Albrecht Ritschl.¹⁰ Adolph Harnack extended Ritschl's thesis by arguing that the original or genuine Christian perception of God was corrupted by the medieval scholastics through their attempt to harmonize Christianity with Greek metaphysics.¹¹

So, a common propensity among some modern philosophical theologians is to cite differences between the medieval ontology and modern ontology and to separate what medieval theologians believed from what modern theologians believe, or ought to believe, about God. One may perhaps argue that many of these modern theologians have simply substituted their philosophy for medieval philosophy both in interpreting the Scriptures and in explicating the notion of God's immutability, but they have not entirely shown why modern philosophy surpasses the older philosophy either. These modern theologians simply judge their philosophical suppositions as better explicating what biblical writers intended to affirm about God than the Greek philosophical suppositions. Thus, Wolterstorff says,

¹⁰See especially Ritschl's article titled: "Theology and Metaphysics" in *Three Essays*, pp. 151-161.

¹¹Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, translated by Neil Buchanan (Oxford: Williams & Norgate, 1895), II, 247-266.

The biblical writers do not present God as some passive factor within reality but as an agent in it. Further, they present him as acting within human history. The god they present is neither the passive god of the Oriental nor the a-historical god of the Deist. Indeed, so basic to the biblical writings is their speaking of God as agent within history that if one viewed God as only an impassive factor in reality, or as one whose agency does not occur within human history, one would have to regard the biblical speech about God as at best one long sequence of metaphors pointing to a reality for which they are singularly inept, and as at worst one long sequence of falsehoods.¹²

Wolterstorff suggests that the God of revelation, who redeems sinner in this world, must have been a God who has changeful variations among his states. Unlike the God of Greek philosophy who is ontologically unchangeable, says Wolterstorff, the God of Christian religion is a God who (ontologically) changes.

This is so because God the Redeemer is a God who *changes*. And any being that changes is a being among whose states there is temporal succession. Of course, there is an important sense in which God as presented in the Scriptures is changeless: he is steadfast in his redeeming intent and faithful to his children. Yet, *ontologically*, God cannot be a redeeming God without there being changeful variation among his states.¹³

Wolterstorff sees his essay as dispelling those patterns of classical Greek thought that are incompatible with the patterns of biblical thought from the Christian conception of God's immutability. So Wolterstorff calls this process the "dehellenization" of Christian theology and he judges his essay as contributing to this process of the dehellenization of Christian theology.

...Indeed, I am persuaded that unless the tradition of God eternal is renounced, fundamental dehellenizing will perpetually occupy itself in the suburbs, never advancing to the city center. Every attempt to purge Christian theology of the traces of incompatible Hellenic patterns of thought must fail unless it removes the roadblock of the God eternal tradition.¹⁴

But must the dehellenization of Christianity involve the claim that God changes ontologically? I do not think so, and neither do other supporters of the Ritschl-Harnack thesis. Besides, I do not think that a dehellenization of the medieval conception of God is all

¹²Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," p. 181.

¹³Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," p. 182.

¹⁴Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," p. 183.

one needs to correct Aquinas's strong statements about God's immutability, so that they comport with the biblical portrait of God. Since there is a difference between saying, as Aquinas does, that God is altogether or absolutely immutable and saying merely that God is immutable, we need only renounce Aquinas's linkage of absolute to immutability while still holding that God is immutable. So, John Macquarrie says:

It is abundantly clear from our previous analyses and discussions that we cannot accept this [immutability] to mean that God remains in a static condition, and we have even said that it is hard to see how Being that was supposed to be utterly monolithic and inert could deserve the name of "God." Certainly, the God of the biblical revelation is not like this. Yet it is this very God that Christian theologians have called "immutable," and this can hardly be explained away just by saying that they superimposed on the biblical revelation the inapposite ideas of Greek philosophy.¹⁵

Thus Macquarrie denies that the true biblical portraiture of God as one who acts in human history to redeem human beings, which lived and died in human epoch, can be grasped through absolute immutability.¹⁶ And Macquarrie contends that the ascription of absolute immutability to God arose from the need to explain the paradox or the dialectic of dynamism and stability, and to assert the priority of stability over dynamism. This was vindicated by stating that every becoming is included in being, not the other way around.¹⁷

Indeed even some defenders of Aquinas's doctrine of immutability do concede that there is a difference between the biblical and the Greek conceptions of God. But they deny that immutability *per se* is purely a Greek metaphysical doctrine. Herbert McCabe maintains that it is wrong to suppose that Aquinas and the medieval scholastics delightfully adopted Greek thought, logic, and language, thereby reproducing in every way the thoughts of, say, Plato and Aristotle. McCabe says that,

While Aquinas, for instance, adopted words like "substance" and "accidents" he used them differently, like in his description of the Eucharistic doctrine, to say something that Aristotle would have thought unintelligible and nonsense.

¹⁵John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), p. 207.

¹⁶Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 207.

¹⁷Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 207.

Augustine and Aquinas, while adopting Greek metaphysics, contend that the world was made or created by God, something neither Plato nor Aristotle affirmed about the world.¹⁸

Therefore, says McCabe, it is a mistake to perceive the theology of the early Church fathers and the medieval theologians as departing from the biblical witness concerning God by embracing a Hellenistic view of God. McCabe concedes that the early church fathers and the medieval theologians had borrowed precepts and concepts from Greek metaphysics to systematize, clarify, and deepen our understanding of the biblical teaching about God. But he denies that they departed from or distorted the substance of the biblical teaching about God.¹⁹ And Etienne Gilson says that Aquinas did not hide the fact he drew on Aristotle, Dionysius, Boethius, St. Augustine, Avicenna, and Averroes, but he transformed all that he had borrowed to fit his integral theology. As such “what he [Aquinas] has borrowed now becomes less important than what he [Aquinas] has been able to do with this borrowed material.”²⁰ Thus, although the notion of immutability has Hellenistic origin, it does not follow that immutability *per se* is foreign to orthodox Christian thought about God.

So the first charge against Aquinas’s view of immutability is that it is rooted in Hellenistic philosophical conception of God, which conflicts with the biblical conception of God.

B. Aquinas’s View of Immutability Conflicts with Other Divine Attributes.

The second criticism raised by some modern theologians against Aquinas’s doctrine of immutability is that it conflicts with other attributes of God, especially with omniscience

¹⁸Herbert McCabe, “The Involvement of God,” *New Blackfriars* (1985): 468.

¹⁹McCabe, “The Involvement of God,” p. 468.

²⁰Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. L. K. Shook (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), pp. 7-8.

and omnipotence. These theologians also assume that the first criticism is correct in charging Aquinas with developing the view of absolute immutability. And they judge that Aquinas's God cannot be the personal God who knows, loves, and interacts with temporal beings in the world. They argue that a God who is altogether immutable (that is, who neither gets better nor worse,²¹ is immobile, and is totally unaffected by any temporal occurrence) cannot be the Christian God of love. They appeal to the Scriptural portrait of God as a person who knows and loves his creation, who intervenes in human affairs, who responds to human prayers, and who empathizes with humanity in its fallen state to the point of his death on the cross, as validating their judgment. They maintain that the Scriptures portray God in personal terms and as performing acts that can only be done by a God who is changeable in his relation with humans in love and empathy.²² Thus Wolfhart Pannenberg says that the concept of God who is absolutely immutable necessarily obstructs the theological understanding of God's relational attributes, and it has done so to an extent that can hardly be exaggerated.²³ Also, although Dorner acknowledges that the medieval theologians found solace in the doctrine of immutability and aseity, he does admit that modern Christians may be justified in holding that God is in some ways changeable because their experience show that God is involved in the changes happening in their world. Thus Dorner says that our modern perception of God's attributes seems to contradict the

²¹Indeed, changes of this kind are so radical that all but Process theologians would reject their being applied to God.

²²William E. Mann, "Simplicity and Immutability in God," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (Sept. 1983): 267-268; David Basinger, "Petitionary Prayer: A Response to Murray and Meyers," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 475-484; Paul Helm, "Omnipotence and Change," *Philosophy* 51 (1976): 454-61; James W. Felt, "Invitation to a Philosophic Revolution," *New Scholasticism* 45 (1971): 87-109.

²³Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970-71), II, 162.

older (Aquinas's) perception of God's attributes which were thought to harmonize with the confession that God is absolutely immutable.²⁴

Similarly Norman Kretzmann argues, in his influential essay on omniscience and immutability, that absolute immutability is incompatible with omniscience. This is because, as Kretzmann contends, an omniscient being must know everything, including what time it is. A being that knows what time it is, is subject to change the content of his knowledge as time changes. But the claim that God is absolutely immutable entails that not even the content of God's knowledge is changeable. Hence, absolute immutability is not compatible with God's omniscience.²⁵ But it is important that God's attributes be in harmony with one another since they cohere in one person, God. So either God is absolutely immutable or omniscient, but not both. God is omniscient; therefore, God is not absolutely immutable.

A similar argument advances the claim that absolute immutability is mutually inconsistent with the divine attributes of omnipotence and benevolence. This argument is advanced mainly in regards to God's response to petitionary prayers and it states thus: Suppose God wills that someone encounters an evil state of affairs as punishment for a sin, but this person repents of the sin and petitions God to withhold the evil. Does God have the power to answer the petition by withholding the evil state of affairs or must he allow the evil state of affairs to obtain? If God withholds the evil state of affairs then God's will is changeable; therefore God is not absolutely immutable. But if God allows the evil state of affairs to obtain, in accordance with his absolutely immutable will to punish the sinner, then God is not benevolent.²⁶

²⁴Isaac August Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, trans. Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 87.

²⁵Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability," *The Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1966): 409-410.

²⁶Cf. Peter Geach, "Praying for Things to Happen" in *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 86-99; Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 7-20; Geach, "An Irrelevance of Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 327-333.

But in both of these arguments it seems to me that the contradiction pertains only to the idea that God is absolutely immutable. But the Scriptures attest to the power and goodness of God in withholding punishment against sinners. To will to punish, then to withhold the punishment entails change of some sort. Therefore, in forgiving sinners, God shows himself as not being absolutely immutable. I suggest therefore that this contradiction can be eliminated if we efface the notion of *absolute* immutability but speak instead of immutability of God *per se*.

The doctrine of immutability *per se* cannot be expelled from theology so as to preserve other divine attributes because as Dorner himself says:

Only when God is discovered to be immutable has an absolutely trustworthy object been found. The immutability of God is a necessary presupposition for the changelessness that the human being, created in the image of God, is supposed to make its own, and whose central point is the constancy of trust and faith that has the power to make the human being secure.²⁷

Dorner's claim here underscores the problem of contemporary theologians with immutability. On the one hand, they wish to retain the concept of divine immutability because to efface it from Christian thought is to erode the basis for faith and trust that God will continue to be good and to be the stable axis around which perpetual motions in the world pivot. Yet, on the other hand, they are mindful that Aquinas's understanding of God's immutability does not resonate with modern Christians who often perceive absolute immutability as conflicting with their religious experience of a loving and personal God. Thus arises the need for our examination of the concept of immutability so as to ascertain its true meaning and what orthodox Christian theologians (ought to) mean when they confess that God is immutable. This examination will also help us determine whether immutability *per se* can rightly be attributed to God who the Scriptures depicts as actively involved in and with the perpetual changes in our space-time world.

²⁷Isaac August Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, trans. Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 87. Dorner argues for an ethical immutability of God, which suggests that God never treats good and evil alike, and that God's love never fails.

My examination of the correct meaning of the doctrine of divine immutability will also address some of the major solutions proposed by Christian theologians in recent years as to how we ought to understand immutability so that it permits and promotes the Scriptural witness to God. I trust that in examining these recent solutions as proposed by kenotic theologians, neo-orthodox theologians, process theologians, and the analytical theologians, we may be able to arrive at the appropriate meaning of divine immutability. However, in this chapter, I shall not discuss their solutions in detail, so that we may not be bogged down in their arguments. But I will briefly state the major points of their argument to highlight their claims so that it will become clear why I think Barth's notion of constancy, mitigated by relational property change, better states what Christians mean, or ought to mean, in the affirmation that God is immutable.²⁸

III. The Four Proposals for a Better Understanding of the Doctrine of Divine Immutability

These four major theological schools of thought are engaged in the current debate over the true meaning of divine immutability, and they have offered four alternative ways of conceiving God's immutability to Aquinas's understanding of absolute immutability.

A. The Kenosis Proposal

Towards the middle of 19th century a group of theologians led by H. R. Mackintosh and Gottfried Thomasius criticized Aquinas's view of "absolute" immutability and proposed an alternative explanation of immutability that allowed them to affirm that God, especially in the second person of the Godhead, *emptied* himself of divinity and

²⁸Note that I have not attempted to show here whether the criticisms against Aquinas's understanding of immutability are valid, nor have I stated in details what Aquinas's view of immutability is. These matters will be taken up in subsequent chapters. For now, my aim is only to list the objections against Aquinas's view of immutability, and to introduce us to the debate over the correct meaning of immutability. In chapter five, after my examination of the Scriptural witness to God, I will then decide whether Aquinas's account of the biblical language regarding divine immutability is tenable or untenable.

became man to redeem humans from sin. The Kenosis theorists argued that Aquinas's claim that God is altogether unchangeable conflicts with the fundamental biblical claim that God the Son emptied himself of certain relational or non-essential attributes so as to be kenotically incarnated in human nature. They cited Philippians 2: 6-9 and the Chalcedonian affirmation that Jesus Christ was God-Man to argue that, in Christ, God emptied himself and took on human nature as an expression of his sacrificial self-giving to atone for human sins. Thus, they say, incarnation entails that God is changeable.

This is how Thomasius states the argument:

a) Although Christ was still fully God, in the incarnation, he emptied himself of such divine non-essential properties as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence for the incarnate state to take up human nature.

b) Omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence are not essential properties because they pertain to God's glorious relationship with the world as its Ruler and Lord.

c) In taking up the form of a servant during the incarnate state to live temporally in the world, God the Son dispersed such great-making properties that express divine glory. Hence the Scriptures say in Phil. 2:5-11 that God temporally emptied himself of great making properties and assumed instead the humbling properties of a servant during the incarnation.

d) However, at the exaltation, when Christ is again glorified, he again assumes these great-making properties (omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence).²⁹ Thus, Thomasius maintains that, in the incarnation, God the Son assumed human nature by first emptying himself of divine relational or non-essential properties. But if so, then according to Kenosis theorists, God changes.

²⁹Gottfried Thomasius, "Christ's Person and Work," *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology*, trans. & ed. Claude Welch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 75-90. See also, Ronald J. Feenstra, "Reconsidering Kenotic Christology," *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, eds. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 128-149.

And the task of a Kenosis theologian is, therefore, to state the changeableness of God in a way that still retains the biblical affirmation of the sameness of God, and to present God as worthy of our adoration. But this is a daunting task and often Kenosis theorists fail at it. As Ronald Feenstra says: “the linchpin of a kenotic theory of the Incarnation is its ability to hold that the kenotically-incarnate Christ was truly divine during his life on earth. Around this issue revolve both the main creative insights and the major criticisms of Kenosis theology.”³⁰

H.R. Mackintosh, more so than any other Kenosis theologian, has understood and elaborated the implications of the incarnation of God the Son for the doctrine of divine immutability. Mackintosh believes that the conflict between the doctrine of divine immutability and the doctrine of the incarnation can only be overcome if we conceive immutability as properly stating that God is unchangeable in his love and faithfulness towards his people. Anything outside of this conception of immutability, warns Mackintosh, will conflict with the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Here is how Mackintosh argues this point:

The most frequent and at first sight the most damaging objection to the kenotic doctrine is that it contravenes the fundamental axiom of the divine immutability. The doctrine of the divine immutability, however, when used in *à priori* fashion, is apt to prove a weapon we grasp by the blade. If we hold with conviction that Jesus is one in whom God Himself enters humanity, then He does so either with all His attributes unmodified, or in such wise as to manifest only those qualities which are compatible with a real human life. And which of these alternatives we shall adopt is of course settled for us by the actual facts contained in the historic record.³¹

For Mackintosh, what is immutable in God is his holy love, which is God’s essence. Therefore, the self-renouncing or the self-retracting of the Son from the supreme end to become the supreme means by which we obtain salvation does not compromise divine

³⁰Ronald J. Feenstra, “Pre-Existence, Kenosis, and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ” (Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1984), p. 36.

³¹Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ*, edited by Charles A. Briggs and Stewart D. F. Salmond (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921), p. 270.

immutability; rather it affirms God's immutable nature as love.³² Mackintosh avers that it is logically implausible to uphold the truth of God's incarnation as well as uphold the classical or Thomistic understanding of immutability. Indeed, Mackintosh says that God could not have become man without modifying some of his attributes. And this modification of attributes, says Mackintosh, may be the real sacrifice that God made to save human beings.

For us men and our salvation, it may well be, [God] committed Himself, in one aspect of His personal being, to a grade of experience qualified by change and development, thus stooping to conquer and permitting the conditions of manhood to prevail over His own freedom. If the alternatives are an unethical conception of immutability and a pure thought of moral omnipotence, which makes room for Divine sacrifice, the Christian mind need not hesitate.³³

By construing immutability as a feature of God's love, Mackintosh believes he has removed the conflict between immutability and incarnation, and he has shown their compatibility. But Mackintosh leaves unanswered how God's essential attribute of love relates to such attributes as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence which many Christians believe to be equally essential for God to hold even in his incarnate state.³⁴

Furthermore, by saying that God the Son emptied himself of certain attributes and yet he remained fully God, Kenosis theologians imply that there are two sets of divine attributes. One set consists of those essential attributes for God to have because they constitute God's essence. And the other set consists of non-essential attributes, which God may give up or restrict when kenotically incarnated without thereby forfeiting deity. So, Kenosis theologians teach that God is changeable, at least in his self-emptying of non-essential divine attributes and in his adoption of human nature during his incarnate state.³⁵

³²Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ*, p. 473.

³³Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ*, p. 474.

³⁴See, Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 71-107; Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1987), pp. 76-97.

³⁵Francis Hill, "Kenotic Arguments," in *The Incarnation*, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1915), pp. 215-228.

God is changeable because the incarnation of God the Son in human form has shown that God *became* or attained to what he was not before the incarnation. Thus Kenosis theologians conclude that God has shown by what transpired in his incarnate state that he is changeable. And although some theologians may find the Kenosis definition of immutability as God's unfailing love and faithfulness insufficient,³⁶ Kenosis theorists purport that the truth of God's incarnation can be retained only if we adopt such a soft understanding of immutability. Accordingly, Ronald Feenstra, a defender of the Kenosis theory, distinguishes between "a very strict notion of divine immutability" in which *any* change in God is prohibited, and a soft or moderate notion of immutability in which change of some sort can be attributed to God.³⁷ And Feenstra concedes that if the strict or strong notion of immutability is upheld then Kenosis theology violates immutability, but if the soft notion of immutability is appealed to then Kenosis theology is compatible with immutability.

It is imperative that the doctrine of immutability harmonizes with the doctrine of the incarnation because both are revealed doctrines. But to state the truth of God's entrance into our space-time world and changeable states requires that Kenosis theorists opt for a softer version of immutability. To show that modern theists willingly support a softer version of immutability, Feenstra cites Isaac A. Dorner who argues that God's immutability applies to God's ethical nature or God's discerning love by which God treats evil and good separately.³⁸ He also appeals to Caird who says, "It is a spurious immutability we ascribe

³⁶For instance, F. Loofs concedes that kenoticism secures Jesus' true humanity and personal unity, but he asserts that it also violates the doctrine of Immutability and the Trinity. E. Fairweather says that the retraction of divine attributes to potency implies a real, ontological change in God, which violates the concept of divine changelessness. See: Ronald J. Feenstra, "Pre-existence, Kenosis and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ," p. 103. Feenstra, who suggests two arguments for how Kenosis theology may violate immutability, says that none of these theologians give an argument to support their claim that kenotic theology violates God's immutability.

³⁷Feenstra, "Pre-existence, Kenosis and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ," p. 103.

³⁸Dorner, *Divine Immutability*, p. 87.

to God, when we conceive of him as existing in isolated self-completeness, remote from the world He has made and beings He has formed in His own image.”³⁹ And he appeals to Schoonenberg, an opponent of Kenosis theology, who nevertheless applauds Kenosis theory for making the concept of God’s immutability capable of greater nuance.⁴⁰

B. The Conception of God as Person

Many neo-orthodox theologians criticize Aquinas’s concept of immutability for prohibiting the predication of any and all changes to God. These representatives of the neo-orthodox theology: Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and to some extent, Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel, and Wolfhart Pannenberg conceive God from the vantage of an existential history of God intertwined with human persons in Jesus Christ, the revealer of God to us. These theologians question Aquinas’s view of absolute immutability for its alienation of God from us. But they affirm instead an intimate and personal relationship between God and humans. And they argue that God’s personal relation with humans entails that God shares in human life and changeable states such that God moves along with humans in their changeable states of affairs.

In the early 20th century, attempts at reviving orthodox teachings led several theologians to rediscover the centrality of the Scriptures (or what the Reformers called *sola Scriptura*) in matters of theology and our understanding of God. And they acknowledged that the Scriptures contain records of God’s self-revelation to us and for us in the person of Jesus Christ.⁴¹ These neo-orthodox theologians, further, argue that because the Scriptures

³⁹John Caird, *Fundamental Ideas of Christianity* (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1899), II, 141 & 139-45.

⁴⁰Feenstra, “Pre-existence, Kenosis, and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ,” p. 104. Cf., Piet Schoonenberg, *The Christ: A Study of the God-Man Relationship in the Whole of Creation and in Jesus Christ*, trans. Della Coulin (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), p. 77.

⁴¹Holmes Rolston, *A Conservative Looks to Barth and Brunner: An Interpretation of Barthian Theology* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1983), p. 17.

reveal Jesus Christ as very God, consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit,⁴² we ought to stop conceiving God as an ontological Being. Rather, we should uphold the lively biblical portrait of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hence they maintain that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is verily God, and the only person through whom we can know God's nature, acts, and will.

The conception of God as the person of Jesus Christ has two significant implications for the doctrine of divine immutability. First, it implies that God has a dynamic life characterized by personal properties. Second, it implies that God's being or the divine life is wholly revealed to us in Jesus Christ, the second person of the Godhead. Let me elaborate on these two points by stating first what it means for neo-orthodox theologians to confess that God has personal properties.

1) God's Dynamic Life Characterized by Personal Properties.

The conception of God as a person implies, for many neo-Orthodox Christians, that God has a dynamic life characterized by personal properties or qualities such as love and freedom. For this reason Barth, for instance, says that God's life is not only the origin of all created change, but is itself the fullness of difference, movement, will decision, action, degeneration and rejuvenation.⁴³ By degeneration and rejuvenation, Barth means God's submission to suffering so as to conquer the suffering of human beings. Suffering entails change or the movement of the sufferer to the object of his suffering, so Barth argues that a God who suffers is somehow mobile or changeable. As Michael Dodds says, "an absolutely immutable God who is not moved by anything outside of himself cannot be the subject of Christian worship since he lacks vital personal qualities such as being moved by love, prayers, worship and praises of Christians and the will to respond kindly to their

⁴²*Nicene Creed*, art. 2; *Symbolum Chalcedonense*, art. 1; *The Athanasian Creed*, arts. 15-18. *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), pp. 58, 62 & 67.

⁴³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1. 31, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrence (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 492.

sufferings.”⁴⁴ Similarly, John Macquarrie asserts that an absolutely immutable God is incapable of loving, because “a God of love is inevitably vulnerable; for there is no lover that does not suffer.”⁴⁵ And Jürgen Moltmann asserts that a God who cannot suffer cannot love either.⁴⁶ Joseph Donceel attributes the bankruptcy of the classical doctrine of divine immutability for the modern person to its complete alienation of God from the whole process of evolution, the millennia of human struggle, the drama and tragedy of human history, and all the travails of human civilization. This alienation of God from every aspect of our history basically abandons God to his unaffected or *Olympian* immutability state.⁴⁷ These theologians question Aquinas’s doctrine of immutability and his explanation of God’s action, love, and life because they believe it renders God cold, static, immobile, passionless, and totally devoid of a *personal* life and love.

Instead they maintain that God, the Father of Jesus Christ, is the living personal God who acts lovingly and freely in the world through his Son for the good of his earthly creatures. These neo-orthodox Christians view the claim that God is a living person as implying that God engages in change of some sort, for that which is altogether unchangeable is essentially dead. So if God is altogether immutable, such that God cannot be moved by anything and he cannot move himself, then God must not be a living person but a dead thing. “For we must not make any mistake,” insists Barth, “the pure immobile is death. If, then, the pure immobile is God, death is God. ... And if death is God, then God

⁴⁴Michael J. Dodds, “Of Angels, Oysters, and an Unchanging God: Aquinas on Divine Immutability,” *Listening* 30 (1995): 36.

⁴⁵John Macquarrie, *The Humanity of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 69.

⁴⁶Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 23 & 38.

⁴⁷J. Donceel, “Second Thoughts on the Nature of God,” *Thought* 46 (1971): 347.

is dead.”⁴⁸ But Barth believes that we can avert this dangerous misconception of God by affirming the biblical revelation of God as a living person.⁴⁹

William Mann accepts Barth’s fundamental conception of God as person, and he faults Aquinas for rendering God impersonal and incapable of responding to the worship and prayers of human beings. Mann argues that,

An [absolutely] immutable being could not be a *personal* being, a being who intervenes in history, who cares for his creatures, who is aware of our sins and works for our redemption, who hears and answers our prayers, who consoles us in our grief, who inspires us in our joy. An [absolutely] immutable God would be a completely impassive God, uncomfortably akin to the textbook caricature of Aristotle’s narcissistic unmoved mover.⁵⁰

Mann thinks that the reason Aquinas held the doctrine of absolute immutability was to avert the error of predicating inappropriate changes (like the alteration and mutation of being) onto God. But Mann says that the attempt to expel inappropriate changes from God misled Aquinas instead into the error of denying that God undergoes any change whatsoever.

Mann suggests that we disperse our fear of change which blinds us from seeing that God changes in all sorts of ways that redound to his credit.⁵¹ Mann claims that if we combine Aquinas’s doctrine of immutability with his doctrine of eternity, then we can see that indeed Aquinas’s God appears not to be a person. But Mann says that we ought to conceive God as a person, for the Scriptures aptly reveal God as a person who freely wills

⁴⁸Barth, *C. D.*, II/1: 31, 494.

⁴⁹Barth, *C. D.*, II/1: 31, 494. Barth is wary of applying the term person to God, because of its modern psychological connotation as center of consciousness, which suggests autonomy and unrelatedness. He insists that we must “outlaw the concept of person” for Trinitarian theology (*C. D.*, 1/1). Rather, Barth prefers the term “modes” or “ways” of Being (*Seinweisen*) (*C. D.*, 1/1). But Barth has been criticized for this formulation: Moltmann describes Barth’s rejection of ‘person’ and subsequent use of ‘mode of being,’ as a “late triumph for the Sabellian modalism” (Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 139); Cornelius Plantinga says, “Barth’s statement that there is only one person in God looks strikingly like what Tertullian, Novatian, Hilary, and Gregory of Nyssa identify as the heresy of modalism” (Plantinga, “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement*, p. 33.)

⁵⁰Mann, “Simplicity and Immutability in God,” p. 268. (My Italics.)

⁵¹Mann, “Simplicity and Immutability in God,” p. 268.

and acts in human history in response to our needs and prayers, but no Scriptural evidence exists to support Aquinas's claim that God is altogether immutable.⁵²

Although one may dispute Mann's criterion for what constitute a person,⁵³ his discussion of the personhood of God and change is vital because it reinforces the belief of many Christians that God exemplifies personal changeable properties. Many Christians are convinced that God's personal properties are expressed in his loving relationship with human beings in the world. So, for instance, James W. Felt describes the central revelatory message of the gospel as relating to us the depth of God's love for us. And since love relates the lover to the beloved and creates a quasi-dependence relation of self-giving, Felt asks: "What can these mean if not that our welfare makes a *difference* to God?"⁵⁴

So the first implication that neo-orthodox theologians draw from the claim that God is a living person is that, in the person of Jesus Christ, God exemplifies changeable personal or relational properties, which contradict the claim that God is altogether immutable. The second implication that neo-orthodox theologians draw from the claim that God is the

⁵²Mann, "Simplicity and Immutability in God," p. 268; Cf. Daniel Dennett, "Conditions of Person," in *The Identities of Persons*, edited by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 175-96.

⁵³Mann says that A is a person only if:

- 1) A is a rational being.
- 2) A is a being to which states of consciousness can be attributed
- 3) Others regard or can regard A as a being to which state of consciousness can be attributed
- 4) A is capable of regarding others as beings to which state of consciousness can be attributed
- 5) A is capable of verbal communication
- 6) A is self-conscious; that is, A is capable of regarding him/her/itself as a subject of states of consciousness.

Now, I think that criteria 3-6 as listed by Mann are accidental in person; hence they may not form the basis for defining a person.

⁵⁴Felt, "Invitation to a Philosophic Revolution," p. 94.

person of Jesus Christ, is that whatever Jesus Christ reveals about God supersedes any philosophical presupposition that we may employ in our attempt to explain the doctrine of divine immutability.

2) The Implication of God's Suffering in Jesus Christ on Our Understanding of the Doctrine of Divine Immutability.

The basic axiom here is that since Jesus Christ is the one who reveals God to us, whatever we truly find in Christ does truly belong to God. From this axiom, therefore, some modern theologians have deduced that Christ's suffering and death in the world reveal that passion and suffering truly belong to God. In other words, Jesus's suffering and death in the world reveal that God suffers with his people. And since to suffer or to die is to undergo change of some sort, we can indeed say God changes.⁵⁵

Paul Fiddes attests that classical theists refused to apply suffering to God⁵⁶ precisely because they wanted to avoid the logical contradictions that suffering may import to God's perfect and immutable nature. This is because, says Fiddes, suffering impacts the sufferer on two levels: i) it impacts on one's inner feelings, and ii) it impacts on one's outward circumstances. On the first level, if God suffers in his inner feelings or mood or emotion or impulse, then God would forfeit his peace, blessedness, eternal bliss or comfort. On the second level, if God suffers he would be seen as subjected to circumstances that produce constraint, restraint, and impingement. But then God's aseity, unconditionality, and

⁵⁵Although impassibility is not logically equivalent to immutability, for our purpose, I will use the terms coextensively because I regard impassibility as an implication of immutability. For supposing that God did not always suffer, and began to suffer in response to human distress (which the Scriptures attribute to human fallenness), then God changed from not suffering to suffering. My use of the terms is also supported by Richard Creel, a defender of the doctrine of divine impassibility, and Robert Brown. See: Richard Creel, *Divine Impassibility* (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), p. 1f. See also, Robert Brown, "Divine Omniscience, Immutability, Aseity and Human Free Will," *Religious Studies* 27 (Fall, 1991): 285.

⁵⁶Cf. Davis, *Thinking About God*, pp. 149-150.

independence would be compromised. Therefore, classical theists refused to attribute the passion of suffering unto God because suffering would limit God.⁵⁷

But many neo-orthodox theologians maintain that, in Christ, God suffers and experiences real pain, both immanently and perhaps transiently, for the sake of redeeming human beings. Indeed they maintain that it is impossible for one to grant that Jesus Christ is fully God, yet refuse to infer from Christ's suffering and death on the cross, that God suffers and changes.

Following Martin Luther's doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum* -- that Christ's divine and human natures communicate to each other qualities or properties, so that in Christ there is a full participation of humanity in deity and of deity in humanity⁵⁸ -- Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues that the suffering of Christ's humanity is the suffering of Christ's divinity. Hence in Christ, God reveals himself as one who suffers for his people. And, for Bonhoeffer, God's suffering is the only appropriate theodicy that fits the magnitude of human suffering, as in Auschwitz, in the presence of a loving God. Thus, on the 16th of July 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter from prison: "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way he is with us and helps us. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering ... Only the suffering God can help."⁵⁹

Bonhoeffer's contention that God suffers with his people is echoed by Jürgen Moltmann, a major theologian of the twentieth century, who concurs that God suffers, feel pain, anguish, and disappointment regarding the human situation. Moltmann avers:

⁵⁷Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 49-51.

⁵⁸Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 193-198.

⁵⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. E. Bethge, trans. R. Fuller et al. (London: S. C. M. Press, 1967), pp. 360-361.

It is [one's] problem how one can speak of God after Auschwitz. Much more, though, is it [one's] problem how, after Auschwitz, one can not speak of God. Of what else after all should one speak, after Auschwitz, if not God? Yes, all these sufferings and Auschwitz do not make sense except in relation to God.⁶⁰

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann argues that since Christ is God and Christ was crucified, it may be said that God suffered and died on the cross.⁶¹ And Moltmann sees no logical contradiction in holding that God suffered and died on the cross of Calvary; rather, Moltmann says, God's pathos requires God to change. Moltmann maintains that God was in Christ, and the presence of God in Jesus entails that God himself suffered in Jesus, and God himself died in Jesus's death. So Moltmann enunciates that God changes and allows himself to be changed (*ad extra*) by others of his own free will.⁶²

Let me note here briefly that there is a logical difficulty of fitting Moltmann's claim that God died on the cross with the Christian claim that God is life itself. Although Moltmann's claim that God died in Christ may have some theological validity, still I do not think that Moltmann has adequately shown how God who is spirit can die. And despite the elaborate and grandiose discussion of God's suffering, Moltmann concludes tamerly that the suffering of love is God's supreme work on God himself, not what has been forced on God.⁶³

Following the lead of European theologians in identifying God with their suffering experiences in World War II, several non-European theologians have echoed the theme of a suffering God with us and for us. Kazoh Kitamori, a Japanese theologian, writing soon after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima that ended World War II, asserts that no way else of

⁶⁰Jürgen Moltmann, "Autobiographical Notes," trans. Charles White, in *God, Hope, and History*, ed. A. J. Conyers (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988), pp. 203-204.

⁶¹Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, edited and translated by P.A. Wilson and J. Bowden (London: 1974), pp. 229-230.

⁶²Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 230.

⁶³Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 99.

understanding God's love is presented to us than in his pain and wrath. Kitamori maintains that the pain and wrath of man make sense only because it is the expression of God's pain and wrath, which are two basic characteristics of love. So Kitamori declares that, "The pain of God which Jeremiah saw, the love in the cross which Paul saw -- this is the essence of God -- the heart of God."⁶⁴ And Kitamori concludes that God's love in sending his Son to die on Calvary supplies something to God, which he had lacked, namely, pain.⁶⁵

Also James Cone, an African-American theologian, reflecting on hundreds of years of black-American enslavement and struggle for equality with white-Americans, says that it is not the amount of suffering in America that is the primary question concerning God; rather it is its distribution that God must deal with. He asks, "How can one make sense of God who lets whites oppress blacks and give blacks the larger share of suffering available in America?"⁶⁶ He answers, "Only by conceiving of God as black, a sufferer, that makes the question of God's identity as a white oppressor null and void. When a black slave suffered, God suffered."⁶⁷

In summary, although this survey of literature on God's suffering and change is not exhaustive, it is sufficient to show that many contemporary theologians perceive God as a sufferer. What is more, for many contemporary theologians, it is God's personal property of love that suggests that God suffers. Consequently, these theologians wrestle with the theological implication of asserting that God suffers and the classical theistic claim that God is absolutely immutable. And they conclude that, because God suffers, we may say that God is changeable. Thus, for instance, Paul Fiddes confesses: "I believe, then, that it is

⁶⁴Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), p. 46.

⁶⁵Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, p. 47.

⁶⁶James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 68.

⁶⁷Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 68.

coherent to say that God is changed by the world in suffering and that this contributes to his being, if he freely chooses that this should be so.”⁶⁸

But if suffering changes God, what is it about God that changes? Is it God’s nature, will, knowledge, or feelings that changes? This question has been addressed by two theological schools of thought, namely, the process theological school and the analytical theistic school. I shall first state briefly the answer given by process theologians, noting their contribution to the present debate on immutability, but without examining it in detail because I think that their answer is essentially faulty beyond repair in this dissertation. Instead, I shall focus on the answer by the analytical theists because I think their suggestion is a viable aid to us in stating exactly what Christians mean when they confess that God is immutable and changeable.

C. The Process Theistic Claim That God Changes.

Much of the heightened attention in recent years to the doctrine of divine immutability can largely be attributed to the provocative statements of leading process theologians regarding God’s nature and activities in the world. A survey of the literature on the doctrine of God’s immutability shows that several modern theologians have noted and addressed some of the issues raised by process theology. And although process theology is on the fringes of orthodox Christian theology, a number of Catholic and Protestant theologians have felt impelled to respond to it because it has been particularly critical of the classical or Thomistic doctrine of divine immutability.⁶⁹ My exposition of the process

⁶⁸Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, p. 68.

⁶⁹See, for example, W. Stokes, “Is God Really Related to this World?” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 39 (1965): 145-151; M. D’Arcy, “The Immutability of God,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 41 (1967): 19-26; J. Donceel, “Second Thoughts on the Nature of God,” *Thought* 46 (1971): 346-370; A. J. Kelly, “God: How Near a Relation?” *Thomist* 34 (1970): 191-229; J. Felt, “A New Look at the Immutability of God,” in *God Knowable and Unknowable*, ed. R. J. Roth (New York: Fordam Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 43-72; W. J. Hill, “Does the World Make a Difference to God?” *Thomist* 38 (1974): 146-164; B.

proposal for understanding God's immutability in relation to changes in the world will focus on the work of Charles Hartshorne, whose theological discourse on the doctrine of God (along the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead) has given form to process theology.

Hartshorne contends that classical theism or Thomism is wrong in conceiving God as exclusively absolute, independent, and immutable. For Hartshorne, God is not only absolute, he is also relative; God is not only independent, he is dependent; and God is not only immutable or changeless, he is also mutable or changing. In a word, Hartshorne says, God is "dipolar." That is, God consists of nonrelative and relative poles or aspects. Thus, the God of process theology is not only independent of the world, but in some essential ways, he is dependent on the world for his existence, his goodness, and his enjoyment. And because God receives these qualities from the world, process theologians generally maintain that God is changeable. Specifically, Hartshorne says that God contains *all* in his concrete or relative pole because God is the "supreme beneficiary or recipient" of all occurrences in the world.⁷⁰ Hartshorne employs the term "surrelativism" to designate this metaphysical and all-inclusive relativity of God to all, and he charges that God changes when the world changes. And Ralph James asserts that, "Being-in-God does not mean being in an unchanging abstraction; it means being in the changing concrete whole. *That*

Davies, "God, Time and Change," *Clergy Review* 63 (1978): 68-72; P. Schoonenberg, "God as Relating and Becoming: A Meta-Thomistic Consideration," *Listening* 14 (1979): 265-78; W. N. Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God: A Neo-Thomist Perspective* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest Univ. Press, 1979). See also, N. Geisler, "Process Theology," in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, ed. S. Gundry and A. Johnson (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), pp. 237-284; D. Bloesch, "Process Theology in Reformed Perspective," *Listening* 14 (1979): 185-95; C. Pinnock, "The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore Neo-Classical Theism," *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. K. Kantzer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), pp. 37-42; R. G. Gruenler, *The Inexhaustible God: Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Process Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983); and R. H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

⁷⁰Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1948), pp. 31-32.

God is changing and supremely relative does not change. It is only in this abstract sense that God is merely absolute and immutable.”⁷¹

The Neo-Thomist W. Norris Clarke notes that process thinkers have made significant contribution to the Christian conception of God in their rejection of the doctrine of immutability because, they think, it conflicts with God’s involvement with the world.

Clarke says,

The primary positive contribution of process thinkers to the philosophical elucidation of the Christian (and any personalist) conception of God has been their notion of God as profoundly involved in and personally responsive to the ongoing events of His creation, in particular to the conscious life of created persons as expressed in the mutability, the mutual giving and receiving, proper to interpersonal relations.⁷²

Similarly, Thomas V. Morris credits process theologians for provoking us to re-examine our doctrine of God’s immutability and to state it in ways that square with our fundamental religious conviction that God intimately relates with us, his creatures, in Christ.⁷³

But the claim of process theology that God is changed or conditioned by the world implies the denial of God’s transcendent-aseity, and therein lies the falsehood of the process theological conception of God. By insisting that what happens in the world makes a substantive difference to the life or consequent nature of God, that God increases in value by benefiting from the world’s value, process theologians reduce the supreme perfection of God to a mere perfection, which can be surpassed and is constantly being surpassed by God.⁷⁴ So then, according to process theologians, God has a history of perfection, which is

⁷¹Ralph James, *The Concrete God: A New Beginning for Theology--The Thought of Charles Hartshorne* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 86.

⁷²W. Norris Clarke, “Christian Theism and Whiteheadian Process Philosophy,” in *Process Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), p. 234.

⁷³Thomas V. Morris, “God and the World,” in *Process Theology*, edited by John Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 285. Morris is quick to note, however, that not all that process theologians say about God and the world is equally valuable, or even acceptable to traditional Christians.

⁷⁴John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, editors., *Process Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 13-28.

identical with the world's history because what happens in the world corresponds with what happens in God. In other words, temporal occurrences do make God what he is or he will be.⁷⁵

Even though some Neo-Thomists, like Fr. Clarke, find the proposal of process theology appealing and are calling for a significant emendation in the Thomistic position that God is not literally or personally related to the world, I think it is incumbent on orthodox Christians to always affirm the transcendent-aseity of God. Clarke is particularly weary of Aquinas's claim that God is not related to the world, and Clarke thinks that orthodox Christian theology pays a high price for holding that the world is really related to God but not God to the world. So Clarke calls on Thomists to shift their framework and to endorse Hartshorne's claim that God is really related to the world and the world conditions God. He declares:

I think this point has now been reached for the Thomistic doctrine that 'God is not really related to the world.' I am willing to go on record as saying that it should be quietly dropped, and that we should without hesitation say that 'God is really and truly related to the world in the order of His personal consciousness.'⁷⁶

And Clarke adds: "In some real and genuine way God is affected positively by what we do. He receives love from us and experiences joy precisely because of our responses. In a word, his consciousness is contingently and qualitatively different because of what we do."⁷⁷ But Clarke is also quick to add that "all this difference remains, however, on the level of God's relational consciousness and therefore does not involve increase or decrease in the Infinite Plenitude of God's intrinsic inner being and perfection."⁷⁸

⁷⁵William J. Hill, "Does the World Make a Difference to God," p. 146.

⁷⁶Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University, 1979), pp. 90-91.

⁷⁷Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God*, p. 92.

⁷⁸Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God*, p. 92.

Although Clarke restricts the benefit that God accrues from the world to God's relational consciousness, for most process theologians these benefits are not limited to God's relational properties. Indeed, they want to say more. For instance, Charles Hartshorne states explicitly that God surpasses his own perfection by his concrescence of the world's good. He contends that God, in his consequential nature, depends on creatures for his goodness, and is therefore substantially affected by what creatures actualize in the world. Because God is surrelated to everything in the world, the world's perpetual changes do contribute to God's perfection by making him the most perfect being than which none greater can be conceived.⁷⁹ Thus Hartshorne rejects the classical or Thomistic view of immutability; instead he advocates that God is changeable in his consequent nature.⁸⁰ But I think that this process view of immutability, especially its assertion that God is bipolar, is so far fetched from the teaching of the Scriptures about God that Christians ought not to accept its proposal for solving the problem of what Christians mean by immutability. Even what Morris indicates as the positive contribution of process theology in conceiving God as really related to the world is, I think, better articulated by Christian analytical theists whom I will discuss next.

D. The Analytical Theistic Claim That God Undergoes Relational Property Change

Like process theologians, many analytical philosophers and theologians also affirm God's real relatedness to this world (and other possible worlds). But unlike process

⁷⁹Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God, and the Logic of Theism* (Chicago, New York, and Willett: Clark & Company, 1941); Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery: A Re-examination of the Ontological Proof for God's Existence* (La Salle, Ill: Open Court, 1965). In these books Hartshorne hails Anselm's definition of God as the perfect being than which none greater can be conceived. That God is a perfect being is true even for the atheist or agnostic who by saying, "There is no God," means to be denying that a supremely excellent, all-worshipful, greatest conceivable being exists.

⁸⁰Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* (La Salle: Open Court, 1991), pp. 42-44.

theologians, many of these analytical theologians such as Alvin Plantinga,⁸¹ William Alston,⁸² and Richard Swinburne⁸³ prefer to predicate changes of God's relational properties. While these individuals are primarily professional philosophers they have, however, made great contributions to Christian theology by utilizing their *forte* in logic and critical analysis to explicate various doctrines of orthodox Christian theology. Because of their contribution to Christian theology and for the sake of brevity, I shall refer to them in this dissertation simply as analytical theists.

Although analytical theists admit that God is really related to the world, they restrict any change that may result in God from his relation to the world to God's relational properties. While analytical theists accept the orthodox theistic teaching that God is self-sufficient and necessarily immutable or unchangeable, they apply this claim only to God's being, attributes, and will, but not to God's relational properties. That the doctrine of immutability is entrenched in Christian theology is evident in the fact that no major theologian, not even the infamous heretics of the early church and middle ages, disputed the doctrine of immutability.⁸⁴ But analytical theists do contend that God has relational or

⁸¹Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980); Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1974); Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967); and *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

⁸²William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁸³Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

⁸⁴For instance: Arius assured Alexander that "We know one God ... Immutable unchangeable..." ("Arius' Letter to Alexander," in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, ed. and trans. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 31). Athanasius insisted that "the Son being from the Father and peculiar to his substance is unchangeable and immutable as the Father himself." ("Athanasius' Oration against Arius," *The Trinitarian*

accidental properties, which are not essential to God; hence God changes with respect to his relational properties. Thus analytical theists advocate a softer version of immutability, which allows for the predication of relational property change to God. Alvin Plantinga describes relational property change as the sort of change that makes the proposition “God was worshiped by St. Paul in A.D. 40” true, unlike the proposition “God was worshiped by St. Paul in 100 B.C.” So in A.D. 40, God had a property He lacked in 100 B.C. And the property of being worshiped by St. Paul shows variance in God’s relationship with St. Paul and vice versa. So we may be epistemically justified in saying that God undergoes relational property change.⁸⁵

Plantinga believes that even St. Augustine would have endorsed the notion of relational property change in God, especially since such changes do not affect God’s aseity (God’s uncreatedness, self-sufficiency, and independence from everything else) and omnipotence (God’s perfect control over all else).⁸⁶ This is how Plantinga explains the distinction between relational and non-relational properties:

Let us say that a property P is relational for a being x just in case the proposition that x has P entails the existence of a (contingent) being distinct from x. So the property of being worshipped by St. Paul would be one of God’s relational properties along with the property of loving St. Paul and the property of knowing that St. Paul was converted on the road to Damascus. On the other hand, the properties of loving everyone, being omniscient, and being everlasting are among God’s non-relational properties. And to say that God is changeless is to say that any property God has at one time but lacks at another is one of his relational properties. ... It is not merely true, but in some way necessarily true, that God does

Controversy, p. 99). Divine immutability is a doctrine held by orthodox theologians even before Augustine and Aquinas defined and elicited arguments for it. Neither was divine immutability dispelled by the Reformers, for the Belgic confession of AD 1561 (and the Revised edition of 1619) affirms, “We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God; and that he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty perfectly wise, just, and the overflowing fountain of all good.” (*The Belgic Confession*, art. I, in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), III, 383-4).

⁸⁵Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, p. 175.

⁸⁶Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, p. 175. Plantinga points to the text in Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, IV. 5 where, he says, Augustine gives a similar example to show that change can indeed be predicated of God *relatively*.

not change with respect to his non-relational properties. God's non-relational properties are, we might say, loss-proof.⁸⁷

And the analytical theists maintain that God's relational properties change in some respect. By insisting that what changes in God is His relational properties and not His essential properties or essence, analytical theists not only associate themselves with orthodox theism, but they also show themselves as differing with process theologians who also acknowledge that God's relatedness to the world implies that God changes. The vital point of difference is that while analytical theists rightly assert (contrary to Aquinas) that God does undergo relational properties change because of his relatedness to the world, they also affirm (contrary to process theologians) that God's relatedness to the world does not destroy the transcendent-aseity or the sufficiency and independence of God. Thus they identify what is changeable of God as not his essence, attributes, or will but only God's relational properties.⁸⁸

1) What Constitutes Relational Property Change in God

But what exactly does constitute a relational property in God by which he changes in relation to changes in the world? Returning now to Plantinga's example of God's relational property change regarding God's knowledge that St. Paul worshiped him in A.D. 40 we may ask: Is it a change in relational property because God's knowledge (mind) changed from an awareness that St. Paul is not worshipping him in 100 B.C to an awareness that St. Paul is worshipping him in A.D. 40?⁸⁹ Or does relational property change refer to the time when God's eternal knowledge that St. Paul is worshipping him corresponds to an actual occurrence in AD 40 (that is, a shift in God's temporal act of relating to St. Paul as

⁸⁷Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, p. 175.

⁸⁸Daniel A. Dombrowski, *Analytical Theism, Hartshorne, and the Concept of God* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 27.

⁸⁹Here is not the place to deal with the question of the divine mode of knowing, but for a detail treatment of this issue see: Luis De Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, trans. And intro. By Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).

Father or Lord)? Or does relational property pertain to what we may describe as a *mere* relational change in God because St. Paul *actually* changed from the state of not worshipping to the state of worshipping God in AD 40 (the sort of change Peter Geach calls, “a mere ‘Cambridge’ change”)?⁹⁰

The supposition of *mere* relational change is discussed favorably among analytical philosophers and mathematicians with respect to relational changes in numbers (say, the change in a number’s value due to a transitive movement of the number from the left to the right of the equation),⁹¹ but I shall say little about it here, because I think that what analytical theists intend to say is that God actually changes with respect to his relational properties in his relation to actual changes in the world. Perhaps one ought to distinguish between the instrument and the content of God’s knowledge and to say that the content of God’s knowledge changes by what he knows (relational change), but God’s knowledge *per se* (what theologians refer to metaphorically as God’s mind) remains changeless (that is, God’s omniscience is loss-proof). So one can say, for example, that although God’s love is extended to St. Paul, even before his conversion on the road to Damascus, at the time that St. Paul began to worship God in AD 40, God entered into a uniquely loving relation with St. Paul that exceeds his love of St. Paul before he began to worship him. Certainly this says more than what mere ‘Cambridge’ change affirms about God.⁹² If so then the analytical theistic elucidation of immutability that allows God to undergo relational property change says what is intuitively and religiously quite appropriate about God. And in

⁹⁰Peter T. Geach, *God and the Soul* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 71-74. Geach calls this a mere ‘Cambridge’ change because its criterion “keeps on occurring in Cambridge philosophers of the great days, like Russell and McTaggart: The thing called ‘x’ has changed if we have ‘F(x) at time t’ true and ‘F(x) at time t’ false, for some interpretation of ‘F,’ ‘t,’ and ‘t’.”

⁹¹Peter Glassen, “Some Questions About Relations,” *Analysis* 17 (1956): 64-68.

⁹²Geach, *God and the Soul*, p. 72. Geach acknowledges that on mere ‘Cambridge’ change, “Socrates would change posthumously (even if he had no immortal soul) every time a fresh schoolboy came to admire him; and numbers would undergo change whenever e.g. five ceased to be the number of somebody’s children.”

affirming that God does undergo relational property change but not substantial property change, analytical theists appear to subscribe to the view of moderate or soft immutability.⁹³

The significant point of contrast to Aquinas's understanding of God is that analytical theists are willing to identify some of God's properties as essential, therefore unchangeable, and to identify others as relational, therefore changeable. That is, God has some contingent properties as well as some essential properties. They construe God as a being that co-exists with and is intimately related with changeable beings such that their changing states of affairs affect the relationship between God and them. So Robert F. Brown maintains that God's knowledge of what humans do in time renders Aquinas's doctrine of immutability implausible. "I contend," says Brown, "that if human beings have free will (and I believe they do), and if God is a timeless knower of human choices (as the tradition maintains), then God cannot also be immutably *a se* in a strict sense."⁹⁴ Brown thinks that God not only has a timeless (intuitive) knowledge of what human beings will do, but he also has a direct awareness of what human beings are freely doing. Thus Brown concludes that since the act of knowing (particularly inferential knowledge) affects the knower, especially one who must act in a specific way towards what is known, God is affected by knowing contingent events in the world such that God cannot be absolutely immutable.⁹⁵

⁹³This claim is strengthened when one notes that Plantinga questions divine simplicity which entails immutability (Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*). The connection between simplicity and immutability is plain. When something changes, it endures through alteration; it still exists, and so in some respects it is the same thing, but in some respect it is a different thing. Therefore, a real distinction must be made between what passes away and what persists. However, in a simple being no distinctions can be made, therefore a simple being cannot change. If it does change, then it no longer is the thing it was before the change. If, as Plantinga says, God is not a simple being, then God can change in some respect and be changeless in some respect. (See: Brian Leftow, "The Roots of Eternity," *Religious Studies* 24 (1988): 196; Mann, "Simplicity and Immutability in God," pp. 267-276.

⁹⁴Robert F. Brown, "Divine Omniscience," *Religious Studies*, 27 (1991): 286.

⁹⁵Brown, "Divine Omniscience," p. 287.

2) God's Relational Properties Argued from God's Everlastingness.

Given that the notion of time and how God relates to time is central in my definition of change (SAC), it is important that I close this chapter with a brief comment on what some analytical theists say the relationship of God to our temporal world entails for our understanding of immutability. Some analytical theists claim that God's knowledge of successive temporal events requires us to modify our understanding of God's eternity to include his existence in and through time.⁹⁶ So instead of understanding eternity as teaching that God is completely outside of time, we may understand eternity to mean that God is everlasting. That is, God has temporal properties and he stands in temporal relations. Hence, there is no time in the past, present, or future, when God fails to exist; his existence is from everlasting to everlasting. On this view of eternity, God is not precluded from standing in temporal relations or having temporal properties; rather it is God's existence that is not time-bound. God is eternal because he is, he always has been, and he always will be both in time and outside of time simultaneously. And if God is in time then God is changeable. Thus Geach argues:

And if someone says that God's eternity is something simply out of relation with what occurs in time -- that we ought not to say e.g. that God lived *before* the world came into existence -- then his view is probably confused and certainly unscriptural. [For Scripture says], 'Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.' [And] 'Before Abraham was, I am.'⁹⁷

⁹⁶See, Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, V, 6. The Loeb Classical Library Series, Edited by G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990's edition): 423. Boethius says:

Eternity, then, is the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of boundless life (*interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*), which becomes clearer by comparison with temporal things. For whatever lives in time proceeds in the present from the past into the future, and there is nothing established in time which can embrace the whole space of its life equally, but tomorrow surely it does not yet grasp, while yesterday it has already lost.

⁹⁷Geach, *God and the Soul*, p. 74.

Nicholas Wolterstorff argues similarly that God is related to temporal events, of which one thing occurs before the other (precedence and succession) or occur simultaneously with the other. If God relates to temporal events then, at least, some of God's aspects are members of the temporal array. But if any of God's aspects is a member of the temporal array, then God could not be outside of time. Accordingly, Wolterstorff defines eternity thus:

Def. 1: "x is eternal if and only if x has no aspect which is a member of the temporal array."

Or

Def. 2: "x is eternal if and only if x has no time strand."⁹⁸

Now, Wolterstorff argues that it is quite plausible to conceive of God the redeemer of human beings, who acts in human history, as having aspects which are members of the temporal array. If, for instance, God's instructing of Moses from the burning bush succeeds God's calling of Abraham from Ur then, Wolterstorff asks, "Does not this sort of succession constitute a change on God's time-strand -- not a change in his 'essence' -- but nonetheless a change on his time strand?"⁹⁹ Perhaps so. Consider, for instance, that you are watching a cue ball roll across a pool table. You see the ball occupy space one, space two, and so on, so you observe the cue ball change position. In watching the cue ball change position you had an experience that itself changed, because as the cue ball changes positions so does the content of your awareness change. A change in one's awareness of a temporal event therefore entails a real change in one's relational property, namely, the property of having such and such awareness at such and such a time. If so, argues Wolterstorff, God's awareness of temporal changing events in the world effects change in

⁹⁸Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," p. 185. Note, however, that Wolterstorff's def. 1 and def. 2 are not identical. For on def. 1, God is eternal if none of his aspects is related to any temporal order-relations, to any event in time; while on def. 2, God is eternal if none of his aspects bears a temporal order-relation, to any of those events which God brings about. Wolterstorff thinks that on both counts God is not eternal.

⁹⁹Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," p. 185.

the content of God's awareness.¹⁰⁰ So Wolterstorff maintains that because God is everlasting, and some of his properties are temporal or are related to temporal events, God does undergo relational property change.

IV. Conclusion

I conclude that the view that God changes is a standard feature of late nineteenth and twentieth century (philosophical) theology. It is prominent in the discussions of the incarnation, the person of God, God's relationship to the world or God's knowledge of changeable human acts, which affect God's relational properties. This I do not dispute. But, as this chapter shows, theologians are not in agreement on what exactly is changeable and what exactly is changeless in God. Does God change by relinquishing certain non-essential attributes like omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience when he was kenotically incarnated on earth? Does God change in his person? Does God change with respect to his relational properties in his awareness of changing temporal events? These are questions that dominate the present theological debate regarding divine immutability, on which I shall say more in the succeeding chapters.

In the succeeding chapters I shall, therefore, try to show the theological value of the doctrine of God's immutability and identify areas where Aquinas's version of immutability may have inhibited a modern Christian from making a vibrant expression of faith in the Christian God. I will recommend Barth's view of divine immutability as constancy as explicating Aquinas's view of immutability and stating in modern terms what biblically informed Christians should mean by confessing that God is immutable. Where Barth's explication of immutability falls short, I will incorporate some of the insights from analytical theism in providing a full meaning of the Christian doctrine of divine immutability. In short, this dissertation argues for the conception of God's immutability in moderate or soft terms,

¹⁰⁰I have adopted this analogy from Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 343.

which allow a Christian to affirm rightly that God's being or essence (identity) is changeless, whereas God changes his relational properties in accordance with his loving relationship with us.

CHAPTER TWO

THE THOMISTIC DOCTRINE OF DIVINE IMMUTABILITY

I. Introduction

I observed in Chapter one that several modern theologians question the classical or Thomistic doctrine of divine immutability, but I did not explain what exactly the classical or Thomistic view of immutability states. In this chapter I will state and elucidate St. Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of immutability so that those elements of his understanding of immutability that are considered strict or absolute may become evident. This examination should help us ascertain whether Aquinas's view of immutability is tenable, or whether it needs some modification to fit the biblical portrait of God in personalistic terms. The main objective of this chapter on Aquinas's view of immutability, therefore, is to ascertain whether it comports with the biblical portrait of God as one who is intimately and lovingly related to humans in the world. And the main question that this chapter deals with is whether Aquinas's view of immutability can be reconciled with a softer version of immutability, or whether it too closely approximates

the absolute immutability of the Hellenistic *deitas*, such that it is beyond reconciliation with the biblical portraiture of God, as some critics have charged.¹

A. Aquinas's Argument for God's Immutability

Aquinas's thought on the doctrine of immutability is encased in the tightly knitted framework of Aristotelian logic, terminology, and scientific world view (philosophy of nature), a common patrimony among medieval or scholastic thinkers. Aquinas accepts the basic and clear truth of the doctrine of God's immutability or unchangeableness as stated by antecedent theologians such as Augustine² and Anselm.³ But Aquinas also assumes that we can adduce God's immutable nature by contrasting God's necessary existence from the motion of this contingent, created world. Since much of Aquinas's prolegomena is committed to establishing the existence of God in contradistinction with the world and its motions, we see that Aquinas now commits only two articles in the *Summa Theologica* (Ia. Q. 1. A. 9) to the doctrine of immutability, an exiguous treatment (compared to Aquinas's elaborate treatment of other doctrines) that examines whether: (i) "God is altogether immutable, and (ii) whether it belongs to God alone to be immutable."⁴

¹For instance, Charles Hartshorne, Jürgen Moltmann, and Clark Pinnock criticize Aquinas for borrowing excessively from the Hellenistic idea of *deitas* to explicate the Christian God thereby rendering God static and *in situ*, whereas the Scriptures reveals God as our father and redeemer.

²St. Augustine, *De Magistro*, 12.40 and 14.45; Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV. 5. 7.

³Anselm, *Proslogium; Monologium; Gaunilo's In Behalf of the Fool*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, Open Court, 1945), pp. 1f.

⁴St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (S. T.), Ia. Q. 9. 1.

Aquinas gives these three arguments to support his claim that God is altogether immutable:

First, because it has been shown above (1a. Q. 2, A. 3) that there is some first being, whom we call God and that this first being must be pure act without the admixture of any potency, for the reason that, absolutely, potency is posterior to act (1a. Q. 3, A. 1). Now everything, which is in any way changing, is in some way in potency. Hence it is evident that it is impossible for God to be in any way changeable.

Second, because every thing which is moved remains as it was in part, and passes away in part, as what is moved from whiteness to blackness, remains as to substance; thus in everything which is moved there is some kind of composition to be found. But it has been shown above (1a. Q. 3, A. 7) that in God there is no composition, for He is altogether simple. Hence it is manifest that God cannot be moved.

Third, because everything which is moved acquires something by its movement, and attains to what it had not attained previously. But since God is infinite, comprehending in himself all the plenitude of perfection of all being, he cannot acquire anything new, nor extend himself to anything to which he was not extended previously. Hence movement in no way belongs to him.⁵

But to educe Aquinas's meaning of immutability one must to go beyond these arguments to his conception and analysis of God as being in contrast to the world as becoming. I will first examine Aquinas's argument for the unchangeableness of God (*en se*) from the concept of God as being, and then consider how Aquinas's claim that God is altogether immutable comports with the biblical claim that God is intimately related to humans in this time-space and changeable world.

⁵Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 9. 1.

B. The Immutability of God (*En Se*).

Aquinas concludes, from those three premises or arguments stated above, that the true Christian teaching about God's immutability is that God is altogether unchangeable. The first argument aims at establishing the identity of God *per se* or *en se* as unchangeable. In the second and third arguments, Aquinas affirms that God is altogether unmovable. Taken together these arguments affirm that, "God's substance is unchangeable, his knowledge is unchangeable, his will is unchangeable, and his decree is unchangeable."⁶ It is important here to note how Aquinas is defining "immutability." Mutability, for Aquinas, has two major components: First, a *change* of intrinsic being through alteration or mutation in some dimension of being. Aquinas's technical term for this is "substantial" change. Second, a *motion* towards the attainment of what (say, a property) one had previously lacked. Aquinas calls this "accidental" change.⁷ So, Aquinas maintains that the doctrine of immutability denies the predication of substantial and accidental change to God because God is, Aquinas says, one simple eternal being in his perfect divine essence. Accordingly, Aquinas says, "God, then, is whatever He has."⁸

For Aquinas, the heart of the doctrine of immutability is its statement to the unchangeableness of the divine substance and existence. The doctrine of God's immutability signifies that nothing new, be it spiritual, sensible, material, or intellectual,

⁶ Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 19. A. 7, ad. 4.

⁷ Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIIa. 74. 4, 1, 2 & ad. 1, 2.

⁸ Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, I. 23, 6.

which is not in God can come to be in God. Neither can anything, be it spiritual, sensible, material, or intellectual, determine God by the addition of some substantial difference to God.

To obtain a better understanding of Aquinas's view of immutability, it is necessary that one first becomes acquainted with some fundamental philosophical and theological principles or presuppositions controlling Aquinas's discussion of the doctrine of immutability. These are:

1) The *Potentia-Actus* Principle.

This principle states that things change as their potentiality approximate their actuality, for everything that is in any way changeable is in potency toward that which it becomes. It is from the principle of potentia-actus that Aquinas develops his first argument for the unchangeableness of God's being and existence. God, Aquinas says, is the first being who has no admixture of potency but is pure actuality. Since a purely actualized being holds his property *simpliciter*, God, being pure actuality, lacks the potential to become actualized. Therefore, God *cannot* change in any way.⁹ To be in potency is to have a succession of states of being as is the case with creation, which before it was created existed only in the potency of the maker but now actually exists. So whatever is made can be said to have undergone change. But God is not made, He simply

⁹Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 3, A. 1; Ia. 9. 1. See also, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ed. and intro. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), XII, 9. 1047b. Although neither Plato nor Aristotle was describing the Christian God, what they said can easily be applied to the Christian God.

is. Therefore his divine substance is neither generated nor corrupted through a perpetual succession of one state by another as it is with creatures.¹⁰

The cynosure in Aquinas's use of the principle of act-potency in discussing God's immutability is his understanding that God is not merely an intellectual thought in the mind, but the most perfect being.¹¹ Because God is a perfect being, Aquinas says that God's substance can neither be generated nor corrupted. If the divine substance were to gain an addition of some substantial difference (generation) then God would not be perfect, and if the divine substance were to lose any of its substantial properties (corruption) then God would not be perfect. In other words, God's perfection entails that nothing can be added or subtracted from God's being. And the fact that God is the most perfect, that is, God comprehends in Himself all the plenitude of perfection of being, entails that God's substance can neither be generated nor corrupted. Hence Aquinas maintains that God *cannot* change, whatsoever, because God is perfect.¹²

2) The Principle of Divine Identity

Furthermore, Aquinas sees the doctrine of immutability as preserving God's identity as the incorporeal being -- the completely uncaused first, efficient, final, and exemplary cause of all temporal reality.¹³ All corporeal beings, because they are

¹⁰Aquinas, *Physics*, V. 1.; See also, Aquinas, *S.T.*, Ia. Q. 14. A. 2. Ad. 2.

¹¹Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, I. 28, 1.

¹²Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 2. A. 3.; Ia. 9. A. 1. See also, Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: Mentor Press, 1956, 1984), II, 381 B.

¹³Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 2, A. 3.

composed of form and matter, come into existence and pass away. Thus Aquinas says of matter:

Matter receives form: and by receiving form it possesses existence as an instance of a particular kind of thing, air or fire or whatever it may be. ... Matter is actually existent only by form. Whatever is made up of matter and form ceases from actual existence through the separation of the form from the matter.¹⁴

In other words, to say that something is material is simply to say that it is changing into a substance or form of a different kind. Since matter is labile and can be separated from form, corporeal beings that are composed of matter and form must have perpetual existence because something that is self-sufficient and self-subsistent subsist in them. For whatever is neither self-sufficient nor self-subsistent (that is, all corporeal beings that are composed of form and matter) must be caused and sustained by a first being who is self-sufficient and self-subsistent, namely, God. Thus, Aquinas says: “there is some first being, whom we call God and that the first being must be pure act.”¹⁵

Now, Aquinas maintains that God is an incorporeal or immaterial being who is not composed of matter and form. God’s substance, Aquinas says, is therefore pure (substantial) form. No being can lose its substantial form and continue to exist. But God exists as the first, or self-sufficient being. Hence God cannot change either by degeneration or by corruption as material objects do. So, by contrasting God, who is pure form, from material beings who merely participate in form and so undergo substantial

¹⁴Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 50. 2, 5 & ad. 2.

¹⁵Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 9, A. 1.

change through generation and corruption, Aquinas maintains that God's existence is limitless and unchangeable. Rather God is life itself, his *esse* or being is eternally unchangeable because it is the fullness of divine life itself -- so no generation and no corruption can be in God.¹⁶

Furthermore, Aquinas educes from the fact that God is the fullness of life itself a testimony to God's excellence, which is the essential independence of God from other things. So Aquinas says that God's fullness of life is such that God does not need creatures to contribute anything to his existence. God, as the first being or creator, is exactly the same as he would have been if he had freely chosen not to create at all.¹⁷ Indeed, the plenitude of God's life is characterized by the sovereign - *aseitas* of God, which suggests that God is independent of all changeable secondary substances in the world. And Aquinas deduces from this principle of identity that God's immutability is established by the fact that God is an incorporeal being whose necessary existence is not dependent on another sort of being. For this reason, Aquinas states that the primary reason for construing God as altogether immutable is the unchangeable nature of the divine essence or life itself.

3) The Principle of Motion.

Aquinas's argument for God's immutability from the principle of motion shows God to be absolutely immobile. By immobility Aquinas intends the denial of two things:

¹⁶Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 3, A. 7; Q. 7, A. 1; Q. 9, A. 1; Q. 10, A. 1-2.

¹⁷Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I. 87, 1; 88, 2-4.

First, immobility denies that God's essential properties or attributes can pass away or oscillate from one state to another. And, second, immobility denies that God can be moved by any object or circumstance. Since the fusillade of modern criticisms is directed against Aquinas's *via negativa* deduction of God's absolute immutability from the world's motion, I will state and elucidate this argument of Aquinas to see whether it indeed hinders a modern Christian from rightly identifying who the Christian God is.

Aquinas grounds the first claim that God's essential properties cannot pass away or oscillate on his conception of God as a simple being who holds his properties *simpliciter* and is not composed of parts or of form and matter. Matter has an inherent potentiality to change, as when air turns into flames or when wine turns into vinegar. Matter is what is common to air and flames or wine and vinegar that enable them to convert. But the substantial form is what endures the interchange of matter from, say, wine to vinegar. For this reason Aquinas maintains that matter is "the principle of individuation." That is, when matter is considered in its dimensions of quality, quantity, and space it localizes particular individuals as distinct. While form determines what sort of thing an entity is, matter determines it to be this individual with this particular set of spatial coordinates or properties. Hence the absence of matter in God denotes the absence of ascendancy and declension or development in any of God's properties.

Aquinas bases the second claim that God cannot be moved by any object or circumstance on his conception of God as the prime, unmoved mover or the efficient cause of all created reality in whom there is no passivity. Only a passive thing can be acted upon by other objects and can be conditioned by outside influences or

circumstances. For a passive thing does not raise itself to act; it must be raised to act by something that is in act. So whatever is in some way passive must have something prior to it, which sets it in motion. But Aquinas says that God is absolutely immobile because God has no potency -- that is passive potency; rather God is pure act.¹⁸ In other words, nothing is prior to God which sets God in motion.

So Aquinas's argument for divine immutability from the principle of motion is stated in two parts (as points two and three in the above quoted argument). I will now elucidate the first part of Aquinas's argument for divine immobility, which is based on the concept of God as the simple being and denies that God's properties are transient.

Afterwards I will elucidate the second part of Aquinas's argument for divine immobility, which is based on the concept of God as *purus actus*, and denies that God can be moved.

a) Transient Motion

Aquinas posits three reasons for concluding that God is a simple being who is not composed of parts or form and matter and therefore immovable:

i) Because God's attributes are identical with his substance, therefore there are no material accidents in God, who is pure form. Aquinas states:

It follows necessarily from this truth that nothing can come to God beyond his essence, nor can there be anything in him in an accidental way. For being cannot participate in anything that is not of its essence, although that which is can participate in something. The reason is that nothing is more formal or more simple than being, which thus participates in nothing. But the divine substance is

¹⁸Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, I.16, 2.

being itself, and therefore has nothing that is not of its substance. Hence, no accidents can reside in it.¹⁹

ii) Because everything that is constituted of matter and form owes its perfection and goodness to its form. But granted that God is the primal good or the most perfect being, it is impossible that God should be constituted of matter and form. Says Aquinas:

Again, as we have shown, the perfection of each thing is its goodness. But the perfection of the divine being is not affirmed on the basis of something added to it, but because the divine being, as was shown above, is perfect in itself. The goodness of God, therefore, is not something added to his substance; his substance is his goodness.²⁰

iii) Because every being acts by its form and the manner in which it has its form is the manner in which it acts. But Aquinas maintains that we cannot know the form of God, “for by its immensity the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing what it is. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not.”²¹ This means that our knowledge of God’s being and his properties must derive from our contradistinction between God and created beings (that is, via negative differentiation). An example of such a negative differentiation is when we say that God is not an accident thereby distinguishing God from all accidents. Aquinas believes that we can arrive at a good knowledge of God through this process of negative differentiation. And Aquinas thinks this process of

¹⁹Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I. 23. 1-2.

²⁰Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I. 38. 3.

²¹Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I. 14. 2.

negation, if followed strictly, will establish that God is absolutely immovable. So he says:

As a principle of procedure in knowing God by way of remotion, therefore, let us adopt the proposition which, from what we have said, is now manifest, namely, that God is absolutely unmoved. The authority of Sacred Scripture also confirms this. For it is written: 'I am the Lord and I change not' (Mal. 3:6); . . . 'with whom there is no change' (James 1:17). Again: 'God is not man . . . that he should be changed' (Num. 23:19).²²

Now Aquinas maintains that God is a simple being, therefore, all the properties that God has are essential to him such that he cannot give any of them up.²³ But we observe, on the other hand, that composite material objects, like trees, are constantly changing in their atomic and molecular properties. Since God is unlike material objects that are changeable or movable with respect to their contingent or accidental properties (which pertain to their quality, quantity, and location in space-time), we can further infer by way of remotion that God is absolutely unmovable. Implicit in Aquinas's assertion that God is a simple being, not a being who is composed of matter or accidents, is the conclusion that God has no contingent or accidental properties such as pertain to quality, quantity, or location in space-time, which are changeable.²⁴

²² Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, I. 17-18; Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 3, A. 2.

²³ Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I. 17, Art. 1-5. Here Aquinas indicates that the fact that God is not composed of matter is established in the claim that God is a first efficient cause of things. For, if God, who is the first cause, is the material cause of things, it follows that all things exist by change.

²⁴ Aquinas, *Compendium*, Chapter 9. 9. See also, Dodds, "Of Angels, Oysters, and an Unchanging God: Aquinas on Divine Immutability," p. 38.

So, on Aquinas's view, it is not enough to merely say that God is qualitatively, quantitatively, or locationally immutable. Rather one must state that there are no qualities, quantities, or locations in God. So when we predicate such categories as quality, quantity, and place of God we must intend for them to function analogically, in the common mode of human speech, and not literally as if they are proper to God.

But motion, in so far as it is accidental to the object, pertains to such categories as quantity, quality, and location in space. All material beings move by the modification of their properties pertaining to quality, quantity, or location in space-time. For example, a material object may move qualitatively by gaining or losing some of its qualities, thereby becoming other than what it was, as when we say of a man that he is better having learnt. And a material object may move quantitatively by developing, as when we say that a child is well-developed because it has grown bigger or stronger. And a material thing may move locationally by first occupying one place at a certain time and then another, as when on a cold winter morning a squirrel scavenges for food in the dumpster at time t_1 and, later, at time t_2 it retreats into its winter hole. Aquinas denies that God occupies one place at a certain time for God is omnipresent. That is, God eternally extends to all of space simultaneously. Therefore God cannot move by vacating one place to occupy another.

So, in this first part of absolute mobility, Aquinas denies that God can lose or gain properties, God can develop or degenerate, and God can move from place to place. Now let me examine the second part of Aquinas's argument for God's unmovableness, which is based on his conception of God as a non-passive being.

b) Passive Motion

Aquinas formerly states his argument for God's unmovableness from the concept of God as non-passive, purely active, being in his first way demonstration for God's existence. In the first way demonstration that God exists, Aquinas contends that there exists a first being or a prime, unmoved mover who moves all things, but who is not moved by another mover. This prime unmoved mover, Aquinas posits, is God.²⁵ Aquinas says that we can clearly infer from the notion of the first being that God, who moves all things, must himself be unmovable. Although Aquinas states this argument elaborately in both *Summas*, I think its succinct form in the *Compendium* captures the essence of this argument. Here is how Aquinas states the argument in the *Compendium*:

If he [God], being the first mover, were himself moved, He would have to be moved either by himself or by another. He cannot be moved by another, for then there would have to be some mover prior to him, which is against the very idea of a first mover. If he is moved by himself, this can be conceived in two ways: either that he is mover and moved according to the same respect, or that he is a mover according to one aspect of him and is moved according to another aspect.²⁶

Aquinas rejects the first alternative because whatever is moved would be, to that extent, in potency; whereas that which moves is in act. If God is both mover and moved in the same respect, he must be in potency and in act in the same respect, which is impossible or, at least, self-contradictory. And Aquinas sees the second alternative as improbable also, because if one aspect of God is moved and another aspect is mover, then

²⁵Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I. 13, 3.

²⁶Aquinas, *Compendium*, Ch. 4. See also, Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 2. 3.; *S. C. G.*, I. 13. 3-7.

there would be no first mover as such, but only by reason of that aspect of him that moves. Hence Aquinas concludes that the prime mover of all must be altogether unmovable.²⁷

Although the thrust of the first way argument is its demonstration that God exists, Aquinas also sees the argument as further proof that God is unmovable. So Aquinas employs this argument to stipulate that God's unmovableness can be deduced via remotion from the motion of material objects, which are set in motion by an unmoved mover. That Aquinas judges the argument from motions of material objects to sufficiently demonstrate via negative differentiation that God is unmovable is evident in that he supports that argument in *Summa Contra Gentiles* with the same Scriptural texts he cites in support of God's immutability in *Summa Theologica*.²⁸ Furthermore, we see, in the main article on immutability in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas iterating the argument that because God is altogether immutable God is unmovableness.²⁹ Thus, Aquinas concludes in *Commentary on the Sentences* that God's existence as the unmoved mover shows that God is immutable.³⁰

It is instructive to note how Aquinas is defining motion here in the second instance. By motion Aquinas understands the movement towards the attainment or

²⁷Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 9, A. 1.

²⁸Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I. 14. 4; *S. T.*, Ia. 9. 1.

²⁹Aquinas, *S.T.*, Ia. Q. 2, A. 3 and 9.

³⁰Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum* (Sentences), I. 8. 3, 1.

acquisition of some dimension or state of being that one had previously lacked. It is a movement towards a being's *telos* or a being's perfect state of existence. So what Aquinas denies here is that God, who is a simple and purely actual being, can be moved towards an end or *telos*. Again Aquinas appeals to his conception of God as pure actuality in explaining why it is logically incoherent to suppose that God can be moved towards an end.

Aquinas maintains that the divine nature is fully actualized by God, and therefore God cannot move towards realizing new dimensions of himself, or grow into a deeper and richer state of existence. This is what we mean when we say, for instance, that a puppy has developed into a dog. That is, the puppy has realized a fuller state of its existence by becoming a dog. Indeed were God to move towards an end he would no longer be God, the perfect being in the fullness of divine life, but a mere creature who participates in that to which he moves. For this reason, Aquinas insists that as the primary being and first principle of all motion, God must be absolutely immobile.³¹ Remarkably on Aquinas's argument here that God is immobile, Peter Geach says: "Only an unchanging God can transcend the world as its free cause and sovereign Lord. A God who was affected by what happened in the world would simply be one remarkable inhabitant of the changeable world, not the world's creator."³²

³¹Aquinas, *Compendium*, ch. 4.

³²Peter Geach, "The Future," *New Blackfriars* (May, 1973): 213.

Aquinas assumes that all fair-minded people can discern from the evidence in cosmic order that things are in motion, and if they attempt to establish the cause of motion they will inevitably conclude that all motions proceed from something immobile. That is, all motions proceed from something that is not moved according to the particular species of motion in question. “Thus,” Aquinas says,

We see that alteration, generations, and corruption occurring in lower bodies are reduced, as to their first mover, to a heavenly body that is not itself moved according to this species of motion, since it is incapable of being generated, but rather is incorruptible and unalterable. Therefore the first principle of all motion must be absolutely immobile.³³

It is important to note that Aquinas accepted the prevalent cosmology of the Middle Ages that conceived the world as naturally static or existing in a perpetual state of rest, such that another must cause its perceived motion. And to avoid infinite regress in the causes of motion, Aquinas posits the existence of a first, efficient mover (cause) of all the motion in the world. This first, efficient mover also sustains the world at every instance of its motion, but is himself neither moved nor sustained by any other thing. And Aquinas identifies this first, efficient, unmoved mover as God.

It is also important to note that Aquinas’s unmoved-mover principle is supported by his notion of perfection, which negates the acquisition and loss of form by a being who is fully actualized as God is. Perfection pertains to the manner in which a thing participates in its substantial form. And everything that is made comes to be perfect from its movement from potency to act. So Aquinas says, “each thing is perfect

³³Aquinas, *Compendium*, ch. 4.

according as it is in act, and imperfect according as it is in potency and lacking act. Hence, that which is in no way in potency, but is pure act, must be most perfect. Such, however, is God. God is, therefore, most perfect.”³⁴ So Aquinas maintains that,

perfection is said not only of that which by way of becoming reaches a completed act, but also of that which, without any making whatever, is in complete act. It is thus that, following the words of Matthew (5:48), we say that God is perfect: ‘Be ye perfect as also your heavenly Father is perfect.’³⁵

So David B. Twetten says that, for Aquinas, to profess that God is the unmoved-mover or the primal being is equal to affirming that God is the most perfect being.³⁶ An imperfect thing, which is not fully actualized, will necessarily move towards that to which it is to actualize then it, or any of its constitutive parts, will become perfect. Such motion is, therefore, aimed at bringing the imperfect object to its perfect state of being. For instance, a house which is constituted of bricks, timber, and roofing tiles can be moved to its perfect state of existence as a home when furniture and humans dwell in it. And a human being, who is constituted of tissues (flesh, veins) and organs, may nonetheless be called imperfect if he or she lacks good health and virtues -- a full participation in human excellence as such.

³⁴Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I. 28. 6.

³⁵Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I. 28. 10

³⁶David B. Twetten, “Why Motion Requires a Cause: The Foundation for a Prime Mover in Aristotle and Aquinas,” in *Philosophy and the God of Abraham: Papers in Medieval Studies 12*, Ed. R. James Long (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1991), pp. 236-254.; Thomas J. McLaughlin, “Aristotelian Mover-Causality and the Principle of Inertia,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (1998): 137.

Now, Aquinas says that God cannot move in this way because God is the most perfect being. Being the most perfect, says Aquinas, God has achieved complete excellence, and he is free from any flaw or imperfection. Moreover, because God is pure form he cannot again move toward acquiring the fullness of the divine form. So Aquinas asserts that, being perfect, God does not lack any excellence, which results from participation in some genus.³⁷ Rather “God, who is not other than his being, is a universally perfect being. And I call universally perfect that to which the excellence of no genus is lacking.”³⁸

Clearly, Aquinas wants to deny that something or circumstance can move God towards achieving the fullness or perfection of the divine nature. “For,” Aquinas says,

In every genus, furthermore, there is something that is most perfect for that genus, acting as a measure of all other things in the genus. For each thing is shown to be more or less perfect according as it approaches more or less to the means of its genus. Thus, *white* is said to be the measure among all colors, and the *virtuous man* among all men. Now, the measure of all beings cannot be other than God, who is his own being. Consequently, no perfection that is appropriate to this or that thing is lacking to him; otherwise, he would not be the common measure of all things.³⁹

Since God is his own being, that is, “infinite, comprehending in himself all the plenitude of perfection of all being,” Aquinas argues, “God cannot acquire anything new nor extend

³⁷Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, I. 25.

³⁸Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, I. 28.

³⁹Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, I. 28, 8.

himself to anything to which he was not extended previously. Hence movement in no way belongs to him.”⁴⁰

The notion of God’s perfection, derived from remotion, further denotes the following in support of God’s absolute immobility:

- a) God exists necessarily as independent and eternal, unlike created reality whose existence is contingent, dependent, derivative, and temporal.
- b) No externally independent thing can determine or condition God, who is the unconditioned condition of all. Therefore nothing outside of God can affect God either positively or negatively.
- c) It is logically impossible for God to lack or lose his actuality, thereby becoming passive and available for other things to act on him.⁴¹

By locating God’s perfection in his necessary and eternal being, Aquinas argues furthermore that God’s necessity and eternality preclude mobility from God because a being can move if and only if it exists in successive moments of time.⁴² But given that God is eternal, argues Aquinas, God apprehends the fullness of divine life all at once. For it is the apprehension of the uniformity of what is altogether outside of movement that precisely

⁴⁰Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 9, A. 1.

⁴¹Cf. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 71.

⁴²Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 10. 1. See also, Richard E. Creel, “Immutability and Impassability,” *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Eds. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1977), p. 313. In Aquinas, this argument serves a double purpose of showing that God’s eternity establishes his immutability and that eternity follows from immutability.

constitutes the nature of eternity. Hence, being eternal, God *cannot* undergo successions, because eternality is interminable, that is, lacks beginning and end.

In summary, the preceding examination of Aquinas's view of divine immutability highlights two major points. First, that God is immutable because God's substantial form, having no potency and not being composed of matter, is altogether unchangeable. Second, that God's essential properties, having no accidental qualities, quantities, or locations in space and time, are not subject to growth or development or motion whatsoever. Furthermore, for Aquinas, the unmovableness of God follows from the fact that God is a perfect, simple, and primal being who cannot be moved by another being or circumstance. So far Aquinas denies that God is changeable and moveable, but now I must ask a third question: can God move himself?

C. Can God Move Himself?

Aquinas has argued that God's absolute immobility entails that God cannot be moved by another thing or circumstance, but can God move himself? Aquinas answers that if by "move" one means a mobility of God towards the world of change then, no, God cannot move himself. But if by "move" one signifies the *operations* of God in understanding and loving himself then, perhaps, God can be said to move himself.⁴³ Aquinas hesitates to unqualifiedly state that God moves himself, because, as I have already shown, Aquinas's conception of God as the unmoved mover negates the possibility of

⁴³Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 9, A. 1, rep. 1.

God's movement (*ad extra*) towards the world. And why must this be so? Aquinas thinks that to be the mover of objects in the world, God must be a stable axis around which the frequent changes in the world revolve. No God who vacillates or moves himself can guarantee the stability of the world. God guarantees the stability and the continuity of the world towards its end; hence, God *cannot* move whatsoever.⁴⁴

So, in one sense of the word "move," Aquinas insists that God must be absolutely immobile. But, in the other sense of the word "move," Aquinas grants that Augustine⁴⁵ and Plato⁴⁶ may be excused for predicating self-movement to the first mover. But Aquinas maintains that their claim that God, the first mover, moves himself must not be construed in a way that contradicts the absolute immobility of God. For while Plato and Augustine called every operation a movement, even the acts of understanding, willing, and loving, Aquinas designates the term act for all operations. Aquinas allows that, "because God understands and loves himself, in that respect, ... God moves himself."⁴⁷ But

⁴⁴Aquinas, *S. T.*, 1a. 2. A. 3; 1a. 9. A. 1. See also, René Descartes, *Meditations*, III, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), p. 36; Also, P. T. Geach, *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), p. 322; *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977):, pp. 42-43; Keith Ward, *The Concept of God* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1977), pp. 153, 155.

⁴⁵St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V, 16-17. Augustine states that some predicates begin to apply to God in time, not because God begins to be in a new way, but because of a change in some creatures with respect to which God is said to be related. Thus, for example, Augustine says, God came to be the Lord of Israel only when that patriarch came to be.

⁴⁶Plato, *Timaeus*, 30. 34; *Phaedrus*, 245. See also, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 6 (1071b37); Averroes, *Physics*, VIII, 40 (IV, 380b).

⁴⁷Aquinas, *S. T.*, 1a. 9. 1. Rep. Obj. 1.

Aquinas emphatically denies that God moves himself in the sense of movement belonging to a thing existing in potency, as we now speak of change and movement.

To support his claim that God does not move himself, Aquinas further appeals to Aristotle in arguing that:

If something moves itself, it must have within itself the principle of its own motion; otherwise it is clearly moved by another. Furthermore, it must be primarily moved. This means that it must be moved by reason of itself, and not by reason of a part of itself, as happens when an animal is moved by the motion of its foot. For, in this sense, a whole would not be moved by itself but a part, and one part would be moved by another. It is also necessary that a self-moving being be divisible and have parts, since, as it is proved in the *Physics*, whatever is moved is divisible.⁴⁸

So why does Aquinas insist that God cannot even move himself? I think the answer lies in this quotation which conceptualizes all self-moving beings as composed of parts in contrast to God who, Aquinas maintains, is a purely simple being.

D. Divine Simplicity

Let me state right away that Aquinas's view of divine simplicity is complex and difficult such that I cannot discuss every aspect of simplicity and its ancillary matters here. My goal at the moment is only to show how Aquinas's concept of divine simplicity leads him to the conclusion that God cannot move himself. Now, Aquinas argues that God is altogether immobile because were God to move himself, he would either move primarily (that is, God must move by reason of himself, his whole being) or move by reason of a part. The first of these grounds for self-movement cannot be applied to God because it entails that God's being is wholly moving, "For if," Aquinas argues, "while one part was at rest, another part in it were moved, then the whole itself would not be primarily moved; it would

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, Ia. 13. 5.

be that part in it which is moved while another part is at rest.”⁴⁹ But Aquinas maintains that God is in perfect repose, and God’s rest does not follow from the rest of an aspect or part but from the whole being of God. Hence God does not move himself.

Besides, Aquinas argues that God is not composed of parts so we cannot say that God is moved by one part of himself, as is the case with an animal that is self-moved by its feet. And while it is logically coherent to say that a composite thing is self-moving by means of its part moving the whole, this cannot be said of God because God is not composed of parts; rather God is a simple being. Further, Aquinas cites Aristotle’s conclusion that to be self- moved is to be in potency, “for motion is the act of something that is in potency inasmuch as it is in potency,”⁵⁰ in contrast to God who is pure act, which is to say that God is the unmoved mover. Aquinas then argues as follows: “That which moves, however, is as such in act, for nothing acts except according as it is in act. Therefore, with respect to the same motion, nothing is both mover and moved. Thus, nothing moves itself.”⁵¹

In saying that God is simple, Aquinas intends to stress that certain truths about creatures are not truths about God. So Aquinas maintains that God’s simplicity derives both from the fact that God is non-composite and non-dependent on his properties and from the constitutive difference between God’s mode of existence and the existence of all other realities. So Aquinas argues:

⁴⁹Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, Ia. 13. 6.

⁵⁰Aristotle, *Physics*, III, 1 (201a. 10).

⁵¹Aquinas *S. C. G.*, Ia. 13. 9.

Moreover, something has to exist prior to any composite, since composing elements are by their very nature antecedent to a composite. Hence the first of all beings cannot be composite. Even within the order of composite beings we observe that the simpler things have priority. Thus elements are naturally prior to mixed bodies. Likewise, among the elements themselves, the first is fire, which is the simplest of all. Prior to all elements is the heavenly body, which has a simpler construction, since it is free from all contrariety. Hence the truth remains that the first of beings must be absolutely simple.⁵²

And because God is *absolutely* simple, Aquinas says that God is unchangeable and immobile. Since composing elements are by nature antecedent to a composite, if God were composite he would be dependent on those elements which he is composed of, and he would move as those elements move in him. Aquinas identifies seven types of compositions, but denies that they can be found in God. And he maintains that their absence in God necessitates our understanding of God as altogether immobile. These are:

- 1) God is not composed of a body, so God has no corporeal parts, and this supports the view that God is immovable.
- 2) God is not composed of matter and form, so God has no dimensional quantity; hence he cannot undergo quantitative change.
- 3) God is not differentiated from his essence or nature; rather God is the same as his essence or nature so he is self-subsistent. Since God is not dependent on anything for his subsistence, nothing can impinge on God.
- 4) God's essence is not differentiated from his existence, so God is his own existence. He needs nothing to exist as God, so the presence or absence of things in the world does not in any way affect God's existence.

⁵² Aquinas, *Compendium*, ch. 9. Here Aquinas appears to accept the theory of Empedocles that the primacy of the four elements: fire, air, water and earth, from which all composite bodies were thought to result from a admixture of these elements. Aristotle allotted to these elements an upwards motion for fire and air, and a downward motion for water and earth, which Aquinas likewise follows in maintaining that these elements differ with composite bodies in their movement and incorruptibility. See also Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 66. 2-3.

5) God is not contained in a genus, so God is not a species or a principle or a privation.

Hence there cannot be any alteration or diminution in God.

6) God is not composed of any accidents, so the predication of virtue and wisdom on God must not be understood literally or univocally.

7) God does not enter into the composition of other things, so it cannot be said that God relates to the world as its soul.

From these premises, which argue that God is immobile (from 1), unchangeable (from 2), not dependent on anything for His existence (from 3-4), and not a composite or created being (from 5-7), Aquinas concludes, therefore, that God is altogether immutable.

But Thomas V. Morris, who accepts the Anselmian view of simplicity, notes that Aquinas's view of simplicity is quite extreme in its denial of movement in God, which also alienates God from his creatures. Morris classifies Aquinas's list of compositions that are absent from God under three grounds all of which, Morris says, support absolute immutability.⁵³ These are:

1) Property Simplicity

This is the view that God is not composed of properties that are ontologically distinct from himself. Aquinas says:

Now the species of a thing is not defined by the matter and properties peculiar to it as an individual; thus we do not define 'human being' as that which has this flesh and these bones, or is white, or black, or the like. This flesh and these bones and the properties peculiar to them belong indeed to this human being, but not to that person's nature. . . . But the individuality of things not composed of matter and form cannot however derive from this or that individual matter, and the forms of such things must therefore be intrinsically individual and themselves subsist as things. Such things are thus identical with their own natures. In the same way, then, God, who, as we have seen, is not composed of matter and form, is identical with his own godhead, with his own life and with whatever else is similarly said of him.⁵⁴

⁵³Morris, "Dependence, Independence, Perfection," in *Being and Goodness*, pp. 289-297.

⁵⁴Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 3. 3.

Aquinas insists that God is not composed of matter and form therefore God's properties, while they signify diversity when they are predicated of composite being, are identical with godhead. Aquinas explains that the diversity implied in the differently named properties is not located in God, but to the way in which we conceive them in relation to God. If these properties were distinct from God himself, Aquinas argues, then God would depend on his properties for his being. But if God depends on anything for his being, then God would not be the first being or the unmoved mover. God is the first being and the unmoved mover; hence Aquinas says God must be identical with his properties.⁵⁵

Perhaps it makes sense to Aquinas that God, being simple, is identical with his properties. But this is a hard proposition for many modern theists to comprehend and accept. For how can a being, even God, be identical with each of its properties or attributes, which nevertheless refer to distinctive aspects of God's being? Wouldn't simplicity negate any real distinction between God's properties as each property would then be identical with God himself and identical with the other properties? There is a problem here. As Alvin Plantinga notes, Aquinas's notion of simplicity seems to suggest that properties which are different are not different when God has them, and that God is nothing but a property.⁵⁶ Recognizing the need for repair, some Thomists -- for example, Brian Davies -- suggest that Aquinas intends to state here only that "the reality to which our talk of God latches on is not something to be literally believed to be distinct from his nature."⁵⁷ I think that many Christians would agree with Aquinas that God is not composed of matter and that God is

⁵⁵Morris, "Dependence, Independence, and Perfection," p. 291-92.

⁵⁶Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), p. 47.

⁵⁷Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 53.

not dependent on his properties; hence God is simple and *aseitas*. But it is hard to say why simplicity entails the claim that God is identical with his properties.

2) Spatial Simplicity

Morris says that Aquinas espouses the thesis that God is not composed of spatial parts therefore God lacks any real relations with spatial objects. And were God composed of spatial parts, then God would be asymmetrically dependent on them and have a real relation with other spatial objects. The main issue here is whether real relations can be established only with objects that are asymmetrically dependent on one another. Aquinas does not think that God is asymmetrically related to creatures such that their changes would impinge on God. And granted that most Christian theists accept that God is incorporeal, it is fairly plausible to suppose that they will also accept Aquinas's claim that God is spatially simple. But this does not mean that God is not related to spatial objects.

3) Temporal Simplicity

According to Morris, Aquinas asserts that God is temporally simple because God has no temporal parts and so he is not really related to anything that is temporal whatsoever. Aquinas argues that were God to have temporal parts then God would be dependent on something that is in time. But since time is an aspect of God's creation, and God is not created, God cannot be in time. Here too Aquinas assumes that possessing temporal parts entails asymmetrical dependence of God on time, the sort of dependence that is incompatible with the perfection or *aseitas* of God.

It is on this point that Morris (and, as I shall show in chapter five, other analytical theists) questions Aquinas's view of absolute immutability, as it appears to extraneously distance God from his own creation. Morris asks: "Is a temporal part an extensionless temporal point, and thus without duration or temporal spread? Or is it, rather, a duration of some positive magnitude?"⁵⁸ Accepting the latter, Morris says temporal parts are like

⁵⁸ Morris, "Dependence, Independence, Perfection," p. 291.

“being time slices of objects, slices of any size, so to speak, from extensionless instants to lengthy duration not exceeding the length the careers of the objects whose parts they are.”⁵⁹ So Morris sees no cogent reason for insisting that God’s simple and perfect nature or existence must be stated in the category of temporal and spatial simplicity, especially given that both implicitly reject the real relatedness of God with humans in time and space.

Furthermore, Morris observes that although other medieval theologians such as Augustine, Boethius, and Anselm ascribe simplicity to God, Aquinas’s version of simplicity is quite elaborate and it has profound negative implications for Aquinas’s view of divine immutability.⁶⁰ The main negative implication of Aquinas’s view of simplicity on immutability, as Morris sees it, is that it leads Aquinas to deny what is apparently asserted in the Scriptures, namely, God is really related to and moves towards spatio-temporal beings.

So by maintaining that God is absolutely immobile, that is, God can neither be moved by another nor can God move himself to, say, think new thoughts or perform new acts that he has not already thought and performed in eternity, Aquinas appears to be affirming, for instance, that there was no time when God did not will the fall of Babylon in 538 BC, and no time when, for God, Babylon does not fall in 538 BC. When 538 BC arrived there was no change in God to then destroy Babylon; rather the arrival of 538 BC merely sets into effect the eternal act of God destroying Babylon.⁶¹

⁵⁹Morris, “Dependence, Independence, Perfection,” p. 291.

⁶⁰For instance, Augustine says merely that God’s nature is simple because “it is what it has”(St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XI, 10; *De Trinitate*, VI, 7-8).

⁶¹See, Michael J. Dodds, “Of Angels, Oysters, and an Unchanging God: Aquinas on Divine Immutability,” *Listening* 30 (1995): 38; Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1986), pp. 1-66; Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 219-223.

In responding to those who argue that God moves himself because the Scriptures say God has a soul, and it is the nature of a soul to move, Aquinas says that the term soul does not refer literally, but analogically, to God.⁶² But does not the fact that we predicate the same properties held by material beings of God suggest that God holds these properties and he is conditioned by them just as material beings who hold them are conditioned? Aquinas answers no. And he explains that these properties are predicated of God on account of a similitude of effect, that is, analogically. For example, Aquinas says, "God is said to be angry because to punish is properly the act of an angry man, and since God punishes he is metaphorically spoken of as being angry."⁶³

Now, let me summarize the argument of the preceding section by saying that Aquinas's view of absolute immutability affirms three theses: first, God is unchangeable; second, God is unmovable; and third, God is immobile. I, further, state that most Christian theists accept Aquinas's contention that immutability teaches God to be unchangeable and unmovable, but that not all theists will agree that God is immobile --that is, God cannot move himself towards the world. Most theists understand the fundamental message of the Scriptures as witnessing to God's self-movement towards the world. And they maintain that either Aquinas is correct in saying that God cannot move himself towards the world, or the Scriptures are correct in portraying God as really related to the world. I will address this question in greater details in chapter five,⁶⁴ but for now let me briefly state Aquinas's

⁶² Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, I, 17-18; *S. T.*, I, 3. 2.

⁶³ Aquinas, *S.T.*, Ia. 3. 2.

⁶⁴ Plantinga, *God and Other Minds; Does God Have a Nature*; Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), II, 241-247; Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting;" Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, p. 98f. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429-458.

answer to how an absolutely immobile God can and does relate to creatures in the spatio-temporal world.

II. God's Relatedness To The World

A. Whether the Scriptural Depiction of God as Creator and Redeemer Supports Absolute Immutability.

An important question that arises from Aquinas's argument for God's absolute immutability as implying not only the claim that God is unchangeable and unmovable but also that God does not move himself is how to state God's real relatedness with the world in the manner that coheres with the Scriptural portrait of God as the creator, lover, and redeemer of the world. Even if one accepts Aquinas's contradistinction between God who is the prime, efficient cause or creator of the world and the world which is an effect of God's act (and so concur with Aquinas that no necessity can arise from an effect to its cause), still one must not construe this distinction as negating God's relatedness with creatures as lover and redeemer. My focus in this section therefore pertains to how Aquinas explains the relationship of God to the world, not only as creator, but also as the sustainer of the world and the redeemer of human beings.

It is worth noting that on the one hand Aquinas posits that God is absolutely immobile, and hence cannot move himself towards the world, but on the other hand Aquinas insists that God is ideally related to the world (especially, to humans) both as creator and redeemer, and that human beings are really related to God.

Now, this claim raises two major problems, viz.: 1) how is an altogether immutable or absolutely immobile God nonetheless related to this world as its redeemer? 2) How can Aquinas reconcile his portrait of God as absolutely immutable with the biblical portrait of God as a personal, loving God who was hypostatically incarnated as Jesus Christ in this time-space and mutable world to redeem humans from sin? These questions are often raised by theologians about Aquinas's view of absolute immutability. And I hope that in

answering them we may purge any misconception, if there be any, about Aquinas's view of immutability, which critics accuse Aquinas of adopting from Hellenism into orthodox Christian theology. In the next chapter, I will substantiate Aquinas's answer by examining Barth's view on immutability as God's constancy. But for now let me show how Aquinas tries to resolve these two problems, and evaluate his solution to these two problems.

1) How God Relates to a Perpetually Changing World.

The first problem pertains to how one can state the relatedness of an altogether immutable God to the world that is perpetually changing. Let me observe first of all that there has been a shift in the neoteric philosophical usage of the term "relation" from that of St. Thomas and the scholastics. This shift has led Etienne Gilson, a prominent twentieth century Thomist, to remark that it is hard for modern theists to understand what Aquinas meant by relation, and its division into notional and real relations. And Gilson adds that although Aquinas denies that God is really related to the world, Aquinas nonetheless maintains that God is notionally related to the world. This distinction, Gilson says, is lost on many modern theists who, upon encountering Aquinas's claim that God is not really related to the world understand this as a denial of God relatedness to the world.⁶⁵

Gilson notes that while the Scholastics, particularly Aquinas, denied the real relatedness of God to the world, they affirmed a notional or ideal relatedness of God to the world. But because some post-Enlightenment thinkers, such as Hegel, erected a monism or absolute pantheism by maintaining a oneness of all existent reality as a single substance, which they call God, they maintain that God is *really* related to (or identical with) the world. And because pantheistic substantialism prevailed among the postulation of German metaphysicians such as Fichte and Schelling who posit a single substance or Spirit as what

⁶⁵ Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), pp. 109f. According to Etienne Gilson, all the present-day problems in conceptualizing God's relatedness to the world can be imputed to Immanuel Kant's Criticism and to Auguste Comte's Positivism.

constitutes, in its development, the stuff and reality of all things. Many theologians postulate that the divine substance is also *becoming* developed in the evolution of the world. So most post-Enlightenment thinkers regard the *thing-in-itself* (being) not as a distinct object that imposes itself on the world but as a progressive reproduction of the single substance -- the world -- which is all that exists.

Aquinas, however, maintains a distinction between divine substance and all other material substances in the world and, by utilizing the philosophical parlance of scholasticism, he further distinguishes between real and notional or ideal relations. Real relations exist between a subject and an external object whose being conditions the subject; whereas notional or ideal relations exist only in the mind of the subject. That is, there are no external objects to which he is related. Thus Aquinas avers that while creatures are really related to God, God is not really but notionally related to creatures. Aquinas says this is so because, "God is altogether outside the order of creatures, since they are ordered to him but not he to them. It follows then that being related to God is a reality in creatures, but being related to creatures is not a reality in God."⁶⁶ And Aquinas believes that a notional or ideal relation sufficiently stipulates God's relatedness to the world as creator and sustainer without contradicting the claim that God is altogether immutable.

But how does God sustain the world that he is not really related to? How are all motions and actions in the world subject to God's providence if God is not really related to the world? To explain how God sustains the world that he is not really related to, Aquinas reverts to the distinction between God's eternal act of creating and the temporal effects of that act in the world. Since creation is an eternal willed act of God, Aquinas maintains that God relates to all creatures as actualities in his mind -- notional relation. And since all of God's acts are eternally performed, whose effects we experience in time, Aquinas maintains

⁶⁶Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 13, 7. See also, Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, II, 11 and *De Potentia*, 7. 8.

that God's act of sustaining the world is eternally performed in God's will for every actuality in the world.⁶⁷ Granting that God's actions are not bound by time, Aquinas posits further that God's eternal act of sustaining the world, which we experience in time, need not require God to move toward the world. So Aquinas argues that:

God need not be moved either essentially or accidentally if His effects begin to exist anew ... For the newness of an effect can indicate change on the agent's part inasmuch as it does manifest newness of action; ... But the newness of an effect produced by God does not demonstrate newness of action in Him, since His action is His essence, ... Neither, therefore, can newness of effect prove change in God the agent."⁶⁸

Aquinas insists that God's single eternal act of willing all things produces sufficient effects to sustain all things in time without any further mediate action from God. And Aquinas notes that no contradiction arises to prevent us from saying that God's act of sustaining the world exists from all eternity, whereas the effect or our experience of God's sustenance of the world exists at that time when, from all eternity, God ordained that it comes about.⁶⁹

But I think one may legitimately counter Aquinas's argument here with the argument that, unless God is conceived as a deistic watch maker, God must still somehow act on those effects that occur in time. Furthermore, this act must not be eternal otherwise the effect would also be eternal. Since Aquinas is not a deist who holds that God is totally aloof from the world, it seems to me that Aquinas's God must still somehow "touch the world" in order to get the sequence of effects to fire off.

But a further complication in Aquinas's argument that the world exists as a temporal effect of God's eternal act and every temporal event occurs in the world under the direct eternal willing of God is that God eternally wills what will result from occurrences in time.

⁶⁷Aquinas, *Disputed Questions*, IV, 4.

⁶⁸Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, II, 35. 2.

⁶⁹Aquinas, *S.C.G.*, II, 35. 2.

However, if God wills eternally both that certain individuals be born at certain times and that they perform certain acts that will result in certain events or states of affairs being actualized in time, this would infringe on human freedom.

Now, Aquinas thinks that it is not because God sustains events or individuals in the world at certain times that those events and individuals exist. Rather, God directly sustains his eternal will for all events and individuals, which results in the events and individuals being sustained in time. Hence, Aquinas says that the fact that God sustains the world should never be construed as that God tinkers with one event after another in successions of time, or that God sustains individuals in successive time. God does not sustain the world in the manner that human persons care for things, which certainly requires movement from one event to another. Rather God sustains his will for all things, and so long as God's will for all things is eternally sustained, all things necessarily come to pass in accordance with his will.

Therefore, each thing is ordered to its action by God according to the way in which it is subordinated to divine providence. . . . Moreover, God takes care of each nature according to its capacity; indeed, he created singular creatures of such kinds that he knew were suited to achieving their end under his governance. Now, only the rational creature is capable of this direction, whereby his actions are guided, not only specifically, but also individually.⁷⁰

So Aquinas distinguishes between God's eternal act of ordering things and their temporal occurrence. For instance, God's ordering of the world's destruction by the flood is an eternal act, whereas the world's destruction by the flood occurred in the time of Noah. Again God's calling of Abraham to leave Chaldea is an eternal act, whereas Abraham's hearing the call of God to leave Chaldea occurred in time. And God's ordering that Mary gives birth to the Lord is an eternal act, whereas Mary's actually giving birth to the Lord is a temporal act.⁷¹ For Aquinas, God has eternally ordered the being of creatures and their

⁷⁰Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, II, 13. 4.

⁷¹Aquinas, "Divine Providence," *The Compendium of Theology*, Arts. 135 & 139.

operations. So Aquinas denies that the operation of creatures in time can nudge God into altering his eternal will for the world. In other words, God cannot be coerced to will something for the world that he has not eternally willed freely for the world from eternity. For this reason Aquinas insists that even our prayers do not change the will of God.

Since Aquinas's view of prayer relates to our second question about how Aquinas reconciles God's absolute immobility with the biblical portrait of God as one who is personally and lovingly related to humans in the world, I shall now proceed to examine it.

2) How God Relates to Petitionary Prayers

There are, of course, other kinds of prayers that do not request something of God but are said in our expression of praise, adoration, and gratitude to God. These kinds of prayers do not concern me here, because they do not pose the same kind of problem as does petitionary prayer, which requests something of God, to the doctrine of divine absolute immutability. So in the present context I am considering only those prayers that request something from God or petition God about something.

When Christians petition God about something they expect that God would grant their wishes. But now let us suppose that what they are requesting is not what God intends for them. Can God then change his intention and grant their request anyway? But if all things (including what the petitioner wants changed) are eternally fixed by an absolutely immutable God to whom one is praying, is it not then hard for God to grant petitions? And if God has fixed that what is asked for will occur at a certain time, then wouldn't what is asked for occur with or without the petitioner's prayers? So why do we bother asking for something that is bound to occur at its fixed time?

In response, Aquinas suggests that petitionary prayer must not be understood as a way of coaxing God into doing what he would otherwise not do, but rather as an effort to produce an appropriate and preordained cause which will result in certain effects that God has eternally willed to occur in time. So Aquinas says:

We should also keep in mind the fact that, just as the immutability of providence does not impose necessity on things that are foreseen, so also it does not suppress

the value of prayer. For prayer is not established for the purpose of changing the eternal disposition of providence, since this is impossible, but so that a person may obtain from God the object which he desires.⁷²

In this passage, Aquinas expresses that divine providence eternally determines not only what effects will occur in time, but also what secondary causes will give rise to those effects and in what order they will do so. Now, the human act of praying, too, is a secondary cause. So Aquinas says that we should not suppose prayer as constraining God “because,” says Aquinas, “when we pray we ask principally to be united to God.”⁷³ In other words, prayer is included in God’s plan as causes of certain effects so when we pray we are attempting to fulfil God’s plan that our prayers be the cause of certain effects in time.

Indeed, Aquinas thinks that prayer is expedient for humans, not for the sake of instructing God about how to carry out his eternal providence for the world, but in order that we may not diverge from God’s plan to effect things in the world through our prayers. Our prayers are, therefore, our fervent search for the will of God regarding our lives. “We must pray,” says Aquinas, “not in order to inform God of our needs and desires, but in order to remind ourselves that in these matters we need divine assistance.”⁷⁴ And when God reveals what his will is for us, we must obediently consent to it so that God, the efficient cause, will move us to meet his plan of using our prayers as a secondary cause for the effect. Aquinas rejects the contention that because our prayers do not cause God to act differently from the order of his immutable providence we should cease praying to God. Aquinas likens the futility of that argument to one which says that we should not walk to get to a place or eat to be nourished. For in each of these instances, God has ordained the occurrence of one to precede the other. That is, as eating precedes nourishment so prayer precedes some of God’s action.

⁷²Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I, 29. 1.

⁷³Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIa-ae, 83. 1 rep. 2.

⁷⁴Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIa-ae, 83. 2. rep. 1.

But will this suffice? Does Aquinas's explanation that God determines our prayers to be secondary causation for certain effects sufficiently say why a perfect and unchangeable God should require humans to ask him to do one thing or the other? Does it mean that if, in disobedience, humans refuse to pray then God will not bring about the effect even although he had willed its occurrence in time? Aquinas admits that "Even without asking, God bestows many things upon us out of liberality. Yet for our own good he wishes to give us certain things upon our requests; so that we may gain confidence in God and acknowledge him as the source of all our blessings."⁷⁵ Prayer, Aquinas says, is be a voluntary act of the individual, which is nevertheless willed by God.

But some (such as Eleonore Stump) have maintained that Aquinas has not sufficiently said why God, who understands and wills everything eternally, which can neither be unwilled nor subverted by humans, would still require humans to ask him to do certain things. Indeed, Stump thinks that Aquinas's answer here leads to theological determinism because it not only says that God eternally determines the effects which will occur in time but also God eternally determines the prayers that each human being will make, although humans beguile themselves of praying freely. So Stump concludes that Aquinas's answer "gives us no help with the problem of petitionary prayer."⁷⁶

Perhaps Stump is right in saying that Aquinas's argument does not help us in solving the problem of why an absolutely immutable God who has eternally fixed all acts and their results would still require us to pray to him. Indeed, because Aquinas's answer is based on his "perfect being theology," it has the appearance of theological determinism in it. In place of Aquinas's answer, Stump suggests that petitionary prayer has the religious value of "safeguarding against what I will call (for lack of a better phrase) overwhelming

⁷⁵Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIa-ae, 83. 2. rep. 3.

⁷⁶Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 86.

spoiling” by God and it also “safeguards against the tyrannical and self-indulgent pride” by the petitioner.⁷⁷ So Stump thinks that petitionary prayer restrains God from excessive meddling (interference) by letting God tailor his help only to those needs he has been petitioned about. And petitionary prayer also restrains the petitioner from pride by forcing him to acknowledge his needs, which stops the petitioner from self-indulging pride or becoming a spoiled brat or tyrannical or indolent in the manner of some members of a ruling family. For Stump, therefore, the religious function of petitionary prayer entails that God is not absolutely immutable as the perfect being theology of Aquinas dictates.

To put it succinctly, then, the fact that God relates to humans and responds to their petitions as a father to a child or a husband to a wife or a friend to a friend suggests that God is willing to change in relation to some of the needs that humans express to him in their petitionary prayers. And this conclusion can further be supported by God’s knowledge of creatures and contingencies in our spatio-temporal world.

B. God’s Knowledge of Creatures and Contingents

Earlier we saw that Aquinas maintains that God does not act directly in time; rather it is the effects of God’s eternal acts that occur in time. But it seems to me that Aquinas still has a problem of stating how God’s effects, which occur in temporal sequence, are known by God to be occurring at the moment of their occurrence in temporal succession without God moving in his act of knowing temporal changeable sequences. There seems to be a problem here in stating how an omniscient God can be altogether immutable. There are two basic features of this problem: one feature pertains time and the other feature pertains to change. When employed from the timelessness of God, the argument states the conceptual impossibility of a timeless being knowing actual events as occurring in time. If God is timeless, there are true propositions about actual events occurring in time that God does not

⁷⁷Stump, “Petitionary Prayer,” p. 87.

know. But if so, then, God is not omniscient.⁷⁸ It is not this feature of the argument, but the second feature that concerns me here. The second feature of the argument is employed against the absolute immutability of God. The argument states that necessarily an omniscient being knows every true proposition. A being who knows every true proposition also knows the actual occurrence of events in time. But a being who knows the actual occurrence of events in successive time must keep changing his beliefs so as to remain up to date. If God knows all true propositions, including the actuality of events presently occurring in time, then God must be changing the content of his beliefs. But if so then God's omniscience is inconsistent with absolute immutability.⁷⁹

To make divine omniscience cohere with divine immutability, Norman Kretzmann, for example, grants that "a being that always knows what time it is knows something that is changing -- say, the state of the universe."⁸⁰ But he denies that change in a being's beliefs constitutes a change in the being itself. In other words, Kretzmann understands the doctrine of immutability as negating only those changes that pertain to the being of God. Similarly, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues:

God the redeemer is a God who *changes*. And any being which changes is a being among whose states there is temporal succession. Of course, there is an important sense in which God as presented in the Scriptures is changeless: he is steadfast in his redeeming intent and ever faithful to his children. Yet, ontologically, God cannot be a redeeming God without there being changeful variation among his states."⁸¹

This argument assumes that God essentially knows all true propositions, including propositions about the temporal status of events as occurring, having occurred, or going to

⁷⁸Cf. Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness*, Ch. 5.

⁷⁹Cf. Norman Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability," *The Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1966): 409-421; Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," *God and the Good*, p. 182.

⁸⁰Kretzmann, "Omniscience and Immutability," p. 411.

⁸¹Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," p. 182.

occur. But to know all true propositions implies that the knower penetrates the heart or essence of the thing being known. So whatever God knows, God knows its essence. But to penetrate or know the essence of a temporal event entails motion. Hence, by knowing temporal occurrences, God must be in motion toward those events that he knows.

To this sort of argument, Aquinas would respond that there is a difference between the manner in which God knows actual occurrences from the manner in which humans know actual occurrences. The difference rests mainly in their medium and mode of knowing. Aquinas says that the medium of human knowledge, the intellect, knows by abstracting from sense data (*phantasmata*) and forms a body of knowledge through perception, inference, and deduction.⁸² God's medium of knowledge is his own essence; hence in knowing himself God knows all things. So Aquinas says that in one eternal intuition God has simultaneous knowledge of all things. "Consequently," says Aquinas,

He [God] does not know a multitude according to the order of its parts, and he can know an infinite multitude, but not according to its infinity; for, if he were to know it according to its infinity so that he would be grasping part after part of the multitude, he would never come to its end and never know it perfectly.⁸³

So in response to the argument that God knows by penetrating the object of his knowledge, Aquinas would say that God knows all the parts of an infinite not by a progression of his thought, but in one simple intuition because his knowledge is infinitely perfect. Consequently, God does not know by way of abstraction or deduction or inference or intuition or perception from actual temporal events, so Aquinas would reject the argument that God's knowledge of temporal events or tensed sentences (indexical sentences) implies God is changeable.⁸⁴

⁸²Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 19, A. 4 ad. 4.

⁸³Aquinas, *De Veritas*, I. Q. 2, A. 9.

⁸⁴Aquinas, *De Veritas*, I. Q. 2, A. 9, Re. 5.

According to Aquinas, this conclusion is inaccurate because it assumes that God knows contingent things by participating in their contingency. Aquinas insists, however, that God knows all things, even contingent future events and utterances, as presently existing for him (that is, as having a simultaneously present certitude about them) just because his intuition immures them into his own essence. Since God presently knows himself fully, and since he is the ground of all, Aquinas argues that in knowing himself God presently knows all occurrences in the world.⁸⁵ Here is how Aquinas states the argument:

Now, something is known as future when an order of past and future stands between the event and the knowledge. This order, however, cannot be found between the divine knowledge and any contingent thing whatsoever for the relation of the divine knowledge to anything whatsoever is of present to present.⁸⁶

The basis for Aquinas's contention that God's knowledge of future contingent is simultaneously present to him is his belief that God's omniscience is eternally panoramic. Adopting the analogy of a zenith viewer from Boethius, Aquinas likens God's knowledge of all tensed events and sentences (past, present, and future) to that achieved by someone surveying a parade while situated at the apogee of a tower. With one glance the person on the tower purviews the entire parade, whereas the person on the ground must observe the procession successively. Similarly, Aquinas says,

Since the vision of divine knowledge is measured by eternity, which is all simultaneous and yet includes the whole of time without being absent from any part of it, it follows that God sees whatever happens in time, not as future but as present. For what is seen by God is, indeed, future to some other thing which it follows in time; to the divine vision, however, which is not in time but outside time, it is not future but present. ... In like manner, God infallibly knows all the contingents, whether they are present, past, or future to us; for they are not future to him. He knows that they are when they are; and the fact of his knowing them does not prevent them from happening contingently.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Aquinas, *De Veritate*, II. 3-5; *S. C. G.*, I. 49; *S. T.*, I.14.5.

⁸⁶ Aquinas, *De Veritate*, I. Q. 2, A. 12.

⁸⁷ Aquinas, *De Veritate*, I. Q. 2, A. 12.

So while temporal beings know future contingent occurrences and propositions only in their successive passage in time, Aquinas maintains that God knows simultaneously all future occurrences and tensed (indexical) statements at once. Aquinas says that the reason this appears problematic to us is that we tend to understand and describe God's manner of knowing future contingents univocally, rather than analogically, to the human manner of knowing future contingents. Strictly speaking we ought to describe any event from the point of view of God's knowledge as what is, rather than as what will be.

Let me sum up this section by saying that I think Kretzmann and Wolterstorff have identified a legitimate difficulty that results from stating the doctrine of immutability in absolute terms. The difficulty rests in what we mean by knowledge. Ordinarily, knowledge entails some sort of relationship between the knower and what is known. Aquinas himself admits that knowledge is an intermediate between the knower and the thing being known.⁸⁸ But when one of two terms in a relation changes, the other must also change.

Now, by knowing the world God enters into relationship with the world, but if what God knows changes, does it not follow that the object of God's knowledge of the world must also change? I should note that the central issue here is not whether God's faculty of knowledge (say, the mind or will of God) changes, but whether the object of God's knowledge (that is, *what* God knows) about the world changes. For example, one may argue, at one point God knew that Christ would be born. Now, however, God does not know that Christ will be born but that Christ has been born. So God knows something about Christ the truth of which is temporally conditioned. Hence, we can at least say that

⁸⁸Aquinas, *De Veritate*, I. Q. 2, A. 13.

the objects of God's knowledge are changeable and their changes result in relational changes in God.

We have in this example of the incarnation a good transition from our critique of absolute immutability on the basis of God's knowledge of tensed events to an inquiry into the implication of God's incarnation on the doctrine of absolutely immutable.

C. The Incarnation of God

It would seem to follow from the incarnation of God the Son, Jesus Christ, that God is intimately, centrally, and decisively involved in our time-space and changeable world, such that one may posit that God, through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, had gone through changeable states of affairs. So how does Aquinas understand and state the doctrine of the incarnation of God the Son as the man Jesus Christ of Nazareth in a way that harmonizes with his interpretation of the doctrine of immutability?

Aquinas rightly understands the incarnation as the act of God the Son by which he became a man and dwelt in this world as Jesus Christ to save sinners. Aquinas says:

The Son of God assumed an entire human nature -- that is, not only a body, but also a soul, and not only a sensitive, but also a rational soul ... But it was fitting that the Son of God should assume not an imperfect, but a perfect human nature, since the whole human race was to be brought back to perfection by its means. ... And therefore it was necessary that there should be another knowledge in Christ besides the divine knowledge, otherwise the soul of Christ would have been more imperfect than the souls of the rest of men.⁸⁹

In this affirmation, Aquinas shows his full acceptance of the Chalcedonian faith that Christ is one subject or person of whom divine and human attributes can be truly predicated because in Christ the divine and human natures are fully united. So, for Aquinas, no metaphor or analogy is evoked in calling the Son of God human and divine; rather Christ is literally and univocally called divine and human. And in calling Christ human and divine, therefore, Aquinas does not signify a metaphor, myth, symbol, or anything that might lead

⁸⁹Aquinas, *S.T.*, IIIa. Q. 9, A. 1.

one to conceive Christ as other than God and Man by nature. So Aquinas observes that it is erroneous to say that “the Son of God assumed a person” or “a man was made the Son of God,” for this is the same as saying that in Christ two persons, one divine, the other human, subsist. “It is not precise to say that the Son of God assumed a man,” Aquinas observes, “given the truth of the matter that in Christ there is one *suppositum* and one person.”⁹⁰ But Aquinas maintains that we can rightly say of Christ that, “God is a man,” “A Man is God,” “Christ is the Lord,” and “God was made (became) a man.”⁹¹ So Aquinas argues:

Assuming the reality of each nature, the divine and the human, and assuming their union in person and ontological subject, the statement, ‘a man is God,’ is both true and literal, just as much as the statement, ‘God is a man.’ For the term ‘a man’ can stand for every subject subsisting in human nature; consequently it can stand for the person of the Son which we hold to be a subject subsisting in human nature. And it is of course evident that the term ‘God’ is predicated truly and literally of the person of the Son of God.⁹²

In Aquinas’s view, therefore, what came to be at the incarnation is the union of God and humanity in Christ. At the incarnation, the absolutely immutable Son of God (the Word, the second person of the Godhead) took to himself a changeable human nature and was born in this world by the Virgin Mary.

Now, the question for Aquinas is this: How can God, who is absolutely or altogether immutable, take up a changeable human nature in the incarnation? Does not the fact that God (that is, God the Son) took up changeable human nature and was born into this spatio-temporal world of change suggest that God can and does change in relation to humans or the world? How does Aquinas resolve the paradox of stating that God is absolutely immutable and yet God (the Word) became the man, Jesus Christ of Nazareth? Implicit in the claim that God became man, it seems to me, is the conclusion that God has adopted

⁹⁰Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIIa. 4. 3.

⁹¹Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIIa. 4. 5; 16. 1ff.

⁹²Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIIa. 16. 2.

something new in the incarnation. Indeed, Aquinas acquiesces to this fact in his argument that, “While the human nature in Christ is admittedly something new, nevertheless, the subject subsisting in this human nature is not new; it is eternal.”⁹³

So how can Aquinas reconcile his claim that God is absolutely immutable with his claim that, in the incarnation, God took up something new, the human nature, lived in the contingent realm of temporal existence, suffered and died on the cross, without any of these acts involving a change in God? Does not the incarnation show that God can undergo some sort of change in relation to human beings for the sake of their salvation?

There appears to be a paradox in affirming God’s absolute immutability as well as God’s assumption of human nature in the incarnation. And one way that Aquinas tries to resolve this paradox is to say that since the incarnation did not compromise the divinity of the Son, but rather his divinity remained the same or intact even when the Son assumed human nature, the divine nature did not change in the incarnation. Aquinas believes that the incarnation did not change the divine nature of the Son and this is evident in the fact that at no time did the Son of God lack the eternal divine *suppositum* or any of the divine attributes while incarnate as Jesus Christ on earth. But in saying this Aquinas is careful not to fall into the error of the Nestorians who distinguished between terms predicated of Christ: restricting those referring to the human nature from being predicated of God; and restricting those referring to the divine nature from being predicated of the man.

⁹³Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIIa. 16. 2. Rep. 3.

Aquinas says that no distinction should be made of the subject to which the predicate is attributed, but that “it is necessary to distinguish the two aspects of the subject which justify the predication. For attributes of the divine nature are predicated of Christ in virtue of his divine nature, while attributes of the human nature are predicated of him in virtue of his human nature.”⁹⁴ It is apparent here that Aquinas does grant that opposite attributes can be predicated of Christ, in respect to his divine and human aspects. If so, then attributes of change and attributes of non-change can both be predicated of God the Son. But if Aquinas agrees that, in the incarnation, the Son acquires properties that he did not have how can he still say that God is absolutely immutable?

Perhaps a better way for Aquinas to resolve this paradox is to soften his concept of immutability by affirming on one hand the unchangeable essence, attributes, and will of God while also allowing for the predication of changeable relational properties to God in virtue of his humanity.⁹⁵ Indeed, it seems to me that in his discussion of the incarnation, Aquinas appears to be leaning more towards a softer view of immutability that affirms God’s unchangeableness as well as allows that God, the Son, changed relatively by assuming human nature in time. For example, we saw earlier that the main reason Aquinas maintains that God is absolutely immutable is to protect the perfect, sovereign-*asaitas*, of God in contradiction to this temporal world. But in his response to the question of whether in predicating human attributes of the incarnate God we may be rendering God imperfect, Aquinas says: “no harm is done to God if they are attributed to him by virtue of his assumed nature.”⁹⁶ And, citing a speech at the Council of Ephesus, Aquinas adds:

⁹⁴Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIIa. 16. 4.

⁹⁵Such a thesis is held by Eberhard Jüngel (in *Gottes Sein ist im Werden*), who deduces from the crucifixion of Christ that God himself suffered and died; and Jürgen Moltmann (in *Der gekreuzigte Gott*), who sees the incarnation as a decisive event that integrates humanity into Godhead.

⁹⁶Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIIa. 16. 5.

God considers nothing a wrong to himself that is the occasion of man's salvation. None of the indignities which he elected for our sake can bring hurt to that nature which is subject to no hurt; he made his own what is lowly that he might have our nature. If then what is unworthy and what is defiled bring no hurt to the divine nature but rather bring about the salvation of men, how can you suggest that what was the cause of our salvation was the occasion of wrong to God?⁹⁷

So Aquinas thinks that no harm is done to God's perfection when we say that God assumed human nature and its changeable properties in the incarnate state.

Furthermore, Aquinas seems to suggest that the incarnation entails a relational change. Because this point is important for my thesis, and yet it is contentious, I will quote Aquinas here substantially. Here is how Aquinas states this argument:

It has already been stated that use of the term 'to be made' implies that something is newly predicated of another. Whenever such new predication is accompanied by change in the subject, then 'to be made' is equivalent to undergoing change. This is the case with predicates signifying attributes which intrinsically modify the subject. So, for example, whiteness or quantity cannot newly affect a subject without its newly undergoing change in respect of whiteness or quantity.

In the case, however, of predicates signifying relationships, it can happen that these are newly predicated of a subject without its being intrinsically changed. A man, for example, can be made to stand on the right-hand side without any change occurring in himself, simply because someone else moves to his left. Accordingly, when there is question of such predicates as these, not everything which is said 'to be made' necessarily undergoes change; it can happen that the same effect is produced in virtue of a change in something else. It is in this sense that we say, to God, Thou, O Lord, has been made our refuge.

Now 'to be a man' is attributed to God in virtue of the union; and this union is a form of relation. Accordingly, without any change in God being implied, we newly predicate of him that he is a man by reason of the change occurring in the human nature which is assumed to the divine person. Similarly, when we say, 'God was made a man' there is no question of attributing any change to God, but exclusively to the human nature.⁹⁸

According to Aquinas, there is a difference in the way that the categories of quality and quantity affect a subject from the way that the category of relation affects a subject. For quality (say, whiteness) and quantity intrinsically modify their subject so that it undergoes an intrinsic (or real) change. But relation, while it sometime follows a real change (say, the

⁹⁷Aquinas, *S. T.*, IIIa. 16. 5. Rep. 2.

⁹⁸Aquinas, *S.T.*, IIIa. 16. 6. Rep. 2.

relation of son to parent) in the subject, does not always presuppose such change (say, being on the right-hand side). Aquinas calls the first scenario 'real relation,' and the second a 'purely notional relation.' And Aquinas says that since the incarnation results in no intrinsic change in God's being, it is the purely conceptual relational change that is denoted in saying that, in the incarnation, God became a man.

But it seems to me that the Scriptures posit the incarnation to not only denote purely notional relation but also real relational change to God the Son. For in the incarnation not only was the human nature adopted by God so that "man was God," but also God the Son assumed human nature so that "God was man" (to use Aquinas's terms). So the Scriptures properly show the Son of God as pre-existing without humanity then assuming human nature and becoming God-man. Indeed, in the incarnation the Son of God also became the Son of Man. And if God's nature is really united with human nature in the incarnation, then Aquinas cannot refrain from predicating relational change (that is, a real relational change) of God. But if Aquinas grants that God undergoes relational change, as it seems to me Aquinas does, then how can he still maintain that God is altogether or absolutely immutable?

From the preceding exposition of how Aquinas attempts to harmonize the doctrine of God's immutability with the incarnation, one can infer that what Aquinas really wants to avoid is the predication of intrinsic changes to God, which connote imperfection in God. This can further be demonstrated in the careful distinction that Aquinas makes in the concept of generation, saying on the one hand that generation as corruption in the sense of that which changes from non-being to being cannot be applied to God.⁹⁹ But on the other

⁹⁹Aquinas, *Compendium*, ch. 4. See also above p. 14.

hand Aquinas admits that generation, in the sense of origin from a conjoined living principle, can be predicated of God.¹⁰⁰

So we can deduce that what Aquinas is mostly concerned with protecting in his contention that God is altogether immutable is the perfection, independence or transcendent-aseity of God over creatures or secondary substances. It seems to me, therefore, that if a change can be predicated of God, but one which does not confer imperfection, dependence, or asymmetric relations to God, then Aquinas would permit such a change to be predicated of God, at least, God the Son. If so, then, we can say that Aquinas would not object to our notion of soft immutability, especially because it states that God is immutable with respect to his essence, attributes, and will; but it also adds that God is changeable with respect to his relational properties. And no imperfection, dependence or asymmetric relation of any kind is being assigned to God in this assertion that God is relationally changeable.

III. Conclusion

Let me sum up, in conclusion, what this analysis of Aquinas' view of God's absolute immutability has established. I have established that Aquinas's view of immutability has two components: the first pertains to God in himself (*en se*), the second pertains to God in relation to the world (*ad extra*). In his treatment of the immutability of God *en se*, Aquinas maintains three theses: one, God is substantially unchangeable; two, God is unmovable; three, God is immobile. But in his treatment of the immutability of God in relation to the world, Aquinas seems to grant, at least, that relational change may be predicated of God (the Son) in virtue of his assumption of humanity in the incarnation.

In addition to the biblical portrait of God as the incarnate Lord and Redeemer of the world, I further maintain that if we take seriously other biblical accounts of God's relation to humans, particularly God's response to Petitionary prayers and God's knowledge of the

¹⁰⁰Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. Q. 27, A. 2.

truth about spatio-temporal events, then we may have good reasons to suppose that the Scriptural portrait of God does not fit absolute immutability.

Now, Karl Barth, a leading twentieth century theologian, who suggests that the doctrine of divine immutability can better be understood as stating that God is constant, has adumbrated what I propose to do in this dissertation. So in the next chapter I will examine Barth's view of immutability as God's constancy, eliciting its strengths and weaknesses and suggesting how constancy can be improved and transformed into a vivified statement for God's immutability for our time.

CHAPTER THREE

KARL BARTH ON GOD'S CONSTANCY

I. Introduction

I stated in chapter two that Aquinas's view of absolute immutability can be modified to comport with the modern theological conception of God in his vibrant relation with humans in the world. In this chapter I will show how Barth develops the notion of constancy as a fitting explication of the orthodox Christian doctrine of immutability that meets the biblical portrait of God and our modern conception of God intimately related to the world. Barth uses the term "constancy" to capture the essence of our modern theological understanding of divine immutability. And the main questions this chapter tries to answer are whether Barth's notion of constancy provides an appropriate explanation for the Christian doctrine of immutability and whether it may be seen as improving on Aquinas's or the classical theistic doctrine of divine immutability.

This chapter will also examine some basic issues involved in stating the doctrine of immutability as God's constancy, and it will elicit the basic theological gain, if any, in construing immutability as constancy. I have elected to examine Barth's view of immutability as God's constancy because I think that it articulates immutability along the

lines of Christian orthodoxy. And it presents a systematic theory of constancy that assigns to God the unchangeableness of essence, attributes, and will, while also maintaining that God is mobile in relation to humans in the world. But not all of Barth's statements about God's constancy are clear and lucid. Where Barth's statements are obscured, such as in his view of divine mobility, I will clarify by incorporating the views of some analytical theists to enhance what Barth means by stating that divine immutability is God's constancy.

A. Barth's Statement of Divine Constancy

Barth claims that all the perfections of God's freedom, of his love, and therefore the whole divine essence, express that God is constant. By constancy, Barth intends to confess that,

There neither is nor can be, nor is to be expected or even thought possible in him [God], the one and omnipresent being, any deviation, diminution or addition, nor any degeneration or rejuvenation, any alteration or non-identity or discontinuity. The one, omnipresent God remains the one he is. This is his constancy.¹

And Barth states that the constancy of God is in harmony with the life of God.

For the one omnipresent God is the living God. But as the living God, he is not himself subject to or capable of any alteration, and does not cease to be himself. His life is not only the origin of all created change, but is in itself the fullness [end or finality] of difference, movement, will, decision, action, degeneration and rejuvenation.²

¹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrence (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), II/1, 1491.

²Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, 491-492.

Barth's view of constancy is easy to grasp provided one understands first the problems that confront Christianity in the post enlightenment era, to which Barth is responding, and provided one also knows something of Barth's theological background and expression about God. Let me now briefly outline these two issues to give us a better understanding of Barth's view of immutability as constancy.

B. Post-Enlightenment Metaphysical Shift In the Understanding of God As Becoming

To grasp Barth's conviction that Aquinas's doctrine of immutability needs to be modified to fit with the modern intellectual life, it is best that I state briefly the intellectual shift in the post-Enlightenment age concerning the conception of God as becoming. Barth's interpretation of immutability as constancy is situated in this intellectual setting of the post Enlightenment era. For this reason Barth's view of constancy must be understood both as softening the extremity of Aquinas's view of absolute immutability and as combating the post-Enlightenment conception of ultimate reality as becoming. The locus of the modern disputation over the orthodox doctrine of immutability is the modern conception of all reality (even the ultimate reality, God) as becoming. If all reality is in the process of becoming then, *ipso facto*, the orthodox Christian doctrine of immutability, which is based on the conception of ultimate reality as being, is objectionable.³

³See, Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*, Unnamed translator (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973).

Barth's understanding of immutability as God's constancy is, therefore, first a means to reconcile the orthodox Christian conception of God as being or immutable with the post-Enlightenment understanding of God as becoming or in perpetual motion. The post-Enlightenment conception of reality as becoming has implications for our understanding of God and his relation to motion in the world. For instance, Newtonian physics denies that God is the direct cause of the world's motion; rather it states that:

- a) Every body continues in its state of uniform motion in a straight line unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed upon it.
- b) The change of motion is proportional to the motive force impressed and is made in the direction of the straight line in which that force is impressed.
- c) To every action there is always opposed an equal reaction; or, the mutual action of two bodies upon each other is always equal and directed to contrary parts.⁴

Now, Aquinas's potent argument for absolute immutability is supported by the Aristotelian cosmological principle that matter is inert, so that it moves only because God sets it in motion. And by identifying God as the unmoved mover of all the motion in the world, Aquinas deduces that God must himself be immutable or altogether unchangeable and unmovable. That is, God can neither change nor be moved by anything or circumstance, not even by himself. But contrary to Aristotle and Aquinas, Newtonian physics identifies gravity as the primary cause of motion. Gravity causes one particle of

⁴Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, p. 14.

matter to attract another particle with a varying force proportionate to the mass and the distance between them.

Thus many post-Enlightenment thinkers no longer find scientific justification for the claim that matter is inert, static, or motionless; or that all motion is caused by an unmoved-mover God. Instead many modern thinkers concluded that the world moves by its own mechanism, and so they no longer embrace Aquinas's argument for God's immutability. Many modern thinkers's proclivity to view all reality as changeable and historical, naturally leads them to posit that God is also changeable. From Hegel to Whitehead, many post -Enlightenment thinkers have steadily swung from the metaphysics of being that characterized classical theology to a conception of all reality as becoming.

Bertrand Russell characterizes the post-Enlightenment person's ethics of belief as an act of trust that is based on demonstrative proofs. "It is not *what* the man of science believes that distinguishes him," says Russell, "but *how* and *why* he believes it. His beliefs are tentative, not dogmatic; they are based on evidence, not on authority or intuition."⁵ Because the Newtonian principles of motion were scientifically demonstrated through experiments, many post-Enlightenment thinkers came to regard Aquinas's theory of motion as dogmatic and scientifically untenable.⁶ Consequently, in the mind of these

⁵ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 525. (Russell's italics.)

⁶ Russell, *A History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 525 ff. Russell asserts, for instance, that "Almost everything that distinguishes the modern world from the earlier centuries is attributed to science, which achieved its most spectacular triumphs in the seventeenth

post-Enlightenment thinkers, the Newtonian explanation of motion has emasculated, if not effaced, Aquinas's argument for the absolute immutability of God.

The dominance of Newtonian physics and biological evolutionism have evoked in the modern mind a view of the world akin to a machine in perpetual motion. So God is not necessary. In its motion, the world appears to obey complex natural laws of cause-and-effect set by the movement of indivisible atoms and the transmission of energies.

Describing this shift from a dogmatic to a scientific explanation of the world, Kirtley F.

Mather says:

In Joshua's world anything could happen. Magic played a most important part in everyday life. Happenings were determined by the caprice of ruling powers whose whims and intentions varied from day to day. Ours is a world of law. Effect follows cause with unvarying relations. Order and regularity reign where formerly magic and caprice held sway. The law of gravity operates relentlessly, the same yesterday, to-day and to-morrow, regardless of bribe and entreaty.⁷

Mather notes, furthermore, that the religious and ethical significance of assigning to God the cause of motion in the world vanished in the Enlightenment:

In the pre-scientific world the forces of nature were under the direct and immediate control of supernatural beings who used those forces to wreak their vengeance upon certain unfortunate or guilty individuals or to add to the physical prosperity of their more fortunate or more righteous brethren. ... But our world plays no favorites. The rain falls alike upon the just and the unjust. Volcanic

century." And commenting on the extent of the difference between the old and the new world, Russell says:

The modern world, so far as mental outlook is concerned, begins in the seventeenth century. No Italian of the Renaissance would have been unintelligible to Plato or Aristotle; Luther would have horrified Thomas Aquinas, but would not have been difficult for him to understand. With the seventeenth century it is different: Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas and Occam, could not have made head or tail of Newton. (p. 252)

⁷Kirtley F. Mather, *Science in Search of God* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1928), pp. 22-24.

eruptions and earthquakes result from the operation of inflexible natural laws which cannot be changed in the slightest by the morality or immorality of the human inhabitants of the locality.⁸

Apparently the post-Enlightenment thinkers have capitulated to Francis Bacon's bid to evacuate the sterile scholastic logic for a more scientific study of nature. But the price that orthodox Christian theology paid for the abandonment of the scholastic logic and Aristotle's cosmology was the loss of Aquinas's ground for designating God as the unmoved mover or the uncaused cause of motion in the world.⁹

C. The Theological Impact of the Enlightenment

Along with the shift from an Aristotelian explanation of motion, post-Enlightenment thinkers also ceased to recognize the authority of the Scriptures for matters of science. Such thinkers as Galileo in Italy, Descartes in France, Bacon in England, and Leibniz in Germany opted for a scientific explanation of the world and its motions through the use of precision instruments and meticulous calculations. Sara Joan Miles notes that the Scriptures were no longer accepted as authoritative for explaining the

⁸Mather, *Science in Search of God*, pp. 22-24. It is important to note, however, that even Newtonian science had not yet explained the inflexibility and universality of "natural law," nor had it reasonably identified an cause of natural law apart from God. It was still customary in science to explain motion as the work of an immovable God who had bestowed on the planets a mechanism for movement. Not until the 20th century, after Albert Einstein moved the emphasis of the law of gravitation away from its relativity to the sun and explained it in complicated and controversial terms of its relativity to time and space, had science been able to rid God from its explanation of motions in the world.

⁹Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Francis Bacon: The Temper of a Man* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1963), p. 8.

world; neither was it authoritative for politics, history, or moral theory.¹⁰ Deists, such as Voltaire, derided dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church and rejected claims of propositional revelation of God in the Scriptures. Materialists such as Denis Diderot advanced the theory of the one substance of the universe formed through the perpetual innate motion of atoms. And empirical agnostics, such as David Hume, argued against the possibility of our knowing anything outside of our immediate sensory perception of the world. The consensus among these post-Enlightenment thinkers is that Aquinas's claim that God causes the world's motion is epistemically unjustifiable because this claim falls outside the province of our immediate sensory perception.¹¹

In light of Newton's theory of motion, Diderot declares this about Aquinas's claim that God is the unmoved mover of the world:

I confess that a Being who exists somewhere and yet corresponds to no point in space, a Being who, lacking extension, yet occupies space; who is present in his entirety in every part of that space, who is essentially different from matter and yet is one with matter, who follows its motion, and moves it, without himself being in motion, who acts on matter and yet is not subject to all its vicissitudes, a Being about whom I cannot form an idea; a Being of so contradictory a nature, is an hypothesis difficult to accept. But other problems arise if we reject it; for if this faculty of sensation, which you propose as substitute, is a general and essential quality of matter, then a stone must be sensitive.¹²

¹⁰ Sara Joan Miles, "From Being to Becoming: Science and Theology in the Eighteenth Century," *Perspectives on Science & Christian Faith* 43 (1991): 218.

¹¹ Jon Hedley Booke, *Science and Religion: Some Historic Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 153.

¹² Lewis White Beck, *Eighteenth Century Philosophy*, eds. Paul Edwards and Richard H. Popkin (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 172.

If the world is already in self perpetual motion then God need not put it in motion.

Moreover, Diderot says, a world that perpetually moves by massing atomic energies into its indestructible form, without aid from God, must equally account for the existence of material beings without recourse to God. Thus, the post-Enlightenment thinkers came to understand both the world's motion and the inhabitants of the world as chance occurrences; rather than as the creative work of an intelligible and an absolutely immutable God.¹³

But I must also note that not everyone believed that the Newtonian theory of motion evacuates Aquinas's idea of God's absolute immutability. Indeed, not all post-Enlightenment thinkers agree that Newton's theory of motion has dislodged God as the prime cause of motion or God's immutability. Many Christians (Catholics, Reformed, and Lutherans) still contended that the world cannot self-cause or perpetuate its motion and that science has neither abrogated nor rendered irrational the eternal revealed truth of Christianity that God is immutable. And the attempt to reaffirm this Christian truth that God is immutable was made in the late Nineteenth century by such theologians as Thomasius and Dorner, who were themselves quite steeped in the post-Enlightenment philosophies of Schleiermacher and Hegel that sought to rationally demonstrate and reaffirm several Christian dogmas.

Schleiermacher's theological synthesis of romanticism with Christian pietism entranced nineteenth century thought to the extent that not only theologians but also

¹³Miles, "From Being to Becoming," p. 220.

philosophers resorted to it. And Hegel's dialectical idealism employed tools of natural science and mathematics in demonstrating the reasonableness of Christian dogmas.¹⁴

Since Barth follows Dorner and Hegel in stressing the (ethical) involvement of God in our history of salvation, my discussion of the nineteenth century theological *Weltanschauung* and immutability will focus on Hegel rather than on Schleiermacher.

Of specific relevance to the post-Enlightenment theological perception and explication of God's immutability is Hegel's contention that what Christian dogmas teach about God are rational or are at least endowed with credentials that can be scrutinized by human reason. Hegel insists that if Christian dogmas are carefully examined they will reveal the Christian God as the God of Nature, who not only causes motion in the world but also is himself moving along with the world.¹⁵ Furthermore, Hegel avers that the Christian belief in God as one Spirit supports the scientific claim that reality consists of a single substance or *Geist*, which undergoes change and development. Hegel divides this changing reality into a triadic structure which, he claims, supports the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

According to Hegel, every change creates an opposite to itself and every action evokes a reaction. These opposing forces find resolution in a third state of affairs that

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York, Touchstone Book, 1968), pp. 386-431; Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 160-254; James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 80-112; Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 59-85.

¹⁵ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From Enlightenment to Vatican II*, pp. 150-157.

carries the process forward by evoking a new triadic reaction. Putting his technical terms in italics, Hegel taught that *thesis* conjures its own *antithesis* into being, and the incompatibility of the two arouses a conflict which is resolved by a *synthesis*, but which further evokes another triad of change. For Hegel the ultimate triad is the Trinity. So Hegel associates the *thesis* with God the Father, the *antithesis* with God the Son, and the *synthesis* with God the Perichoresis or Holy Spirit.¹⁶

So Hegel concludes that Christian dogmas have logical grounds and that the triadic structure of the Christian truths are scientifically demonstrable as genuine truths.¹⁷ And to repel the challenges posed to the Christian explanation of motion by the scientific findings of Newton, Hegel modifies some claims of Christianity about God to fit these scientific findings. This modification is evident particularly in Hegel's conception of God as Becoming. Instead of conceiving God as a being who transcends matter, Hegel conceives God or *Geist* as the becoming reality. Hegel thinks that God is better conceived as becoming because then God is near to all perceived reality, which is becoming. By identifying God as the *Geist*, which is perpetually becoming, Hegel hopes to show that the scientific claim of the Enlightenment that reality is in perpetual motion does not exclude God.

In sum, therefore, the post-Enlightenment scientific explanation of reality as becoming has two implications for the theological conception of God's immutability.

¹⁶Sahakian, *History of Philosophy*, p. 201.

¹⁷Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 87.

First, it implies that God, being indeed a reality, is in perpetual motion or is becoming.

Second, it implies that God, being indeed the cause of the world's motion, is in motion in relation to the world's motions.

II. Explicating Barth's View of Constancy

We are now in a position to explicate Barth's view of God's immutability as constancy, stating first Barth's view of God's unchangeable being and then Barth's view of God's mobility or changeable relations towards the world.

Barth agrees with Aquinas that God's essence, attributes, and will are unchangeable and that God's love and freedom towards human beings are unalterable. But Barth adds that God is related to the world, and so he moves towards the world, even though movement does not change God's being, attributes, and will. Because of this movement of God, Barth uses the term constancy to designate what orthodox Christians mean by confessing that God is immutable. So Barth does not merely iterate Aquinas's concept of immutability; rather he infuses it into his dialectical theology to affirm both the unchangeableness and the movement of God toward the world. Barth likens dialectical theology to a bird in flight or a balancing act like tight-rope walking, because of its constant shift from positive to negative and from negative to positive.¹⁸ Thus Barth conceives dialectical theology or methodology as furnishing tools for mitigating the

¹⁸Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 206.

orthodox Christian dogma of God's immutability with the modern scientific conception of reality as changing. So Barth says that:

Our task is to interpret the Yes and the No and the No by the Yes without delaying more than a moment in either a fixed Yes or a fixed No; to speak of the glory of God in creation, for example, only to pass immediately to emphasizing God's complete concealment from us in that creation; ... Of the creation of man in the image of God simply and solely to give warning once and for all that man as we know him is fallen man, whose misery we know better than his glory. ... A Christian is the master of all things and subject to nobody -- a Christian is the slave of all things and subject to everybody. I need not continue. He who hath ears to hear will understand my meaning.¹⁹

Realizing that orthodox Christian theology must address the modern question of whether God's reality is also becoming, Barth adopts dialectical theology to articulate both the unchangeableness of God and the intimate involvement of God in our changing world. Barth thinks that to answer the most sensitive question of how an immutable God can have truly personal relations with us such that what we do matters to God, we must skillfully distinguish between God's immutable identity (essence, attributes, and will) and God's free movement towards us in love. This is a distinction that must be made, Barth says, lest we fall into the naive view that immutability negates not only change but also any movement of God or, worst of all, fall prey to the modern error that God is basically changeable. Barth sees this distinction as necessarily precluding contradictions in our predication of immutability and mobility to God as these terms refer to separate aspects and not in the same respect to God. So Barth employs constancy as a way of stating

¹⁹Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, pp. 207-208.

God's immutability and mobility towards world. Now, how does Barth explain how God is immutable and mobile in relation to the world?

A. Constancy as Explaining God's Immutability.

Barth's statement about God's immutability, like those of many post-Enlightenment thinkers, abandons the starting point of scholastic theology from a rationalistic examination of the ontological nature of God to begin with an examination of God's self-revelation in Christ to the world. Barth insists that outside of God's self-revelation, we are so ignorant of God's ontological being that we cannot speak intelligently of his immutability without reverting to sheer speculation. It is only through God's gracious act of self-revelation in Christ, attested to in the Scriptures, that we dare speak about God's immutability. Even then Barth notes that while Christ reveals God in his humility, God, as he is in himself (*ad intra*), still remains inscrutable and beyond our comprehension. Consequently, Barth says that our speech about God is always speech about God in his *act*, specifically his humble act of self-unveiling, of knowing, willing and saving the world.²⁰ So Barth views divine revelation as the central act of God in his sovereign love towards the world, that requires us to state the doctrine of divine immutability in congeniality with God's revelation in Christ and the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Hence, Barth advises that our question should not be what is God's immutability like, but what does the life of Christ tell us about God's immutability?

²⁰Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 495.

Barth follows Dorner in stressing God's involvement in the world's motions through Christ and the Holy Spirit. And, like Dorner, Barth rejects the claim of Kenosis theorists that God is changeable because the incarnate Son of God emptied himself of such attributes as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence in order to assume human nature. Barth sees these attributes as *sine qua non* of divinity such that no person can be God without possessing them and whoever possesses them necessarily is God. So Barth maintains that no essential property or attribute that constitutes divinity can be relinquished or modified, even by an incarnate divine person.²¹

However, Barth acknowledges that God holds certain non-essential properties that he may modify or relinquish in the incarnate state. We may also refer to these non-essential properties as the divine relational properties. While Barth does not deny that God relinquished certain (relational) properties in order to assume human nature, he denies that they include omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. So Barth concurs with Dorner that: "If the Logos then had surrendered the knowledge of God, He would not have surrendered a merely relative attribute, but one essentially divine, and it would violate the idea of God..."²²

Still Barth acknowledges that the Enlightenment has cast a shadow of doubt on the historic Christian faith, particularly on Aquinas's claim that God is altogether or absolutely unchangeable. And to remove this doubt Barth proposes that the doctrine of

²¹Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, p. 490.

²²Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, III, 266-267.

immutability be softened from one that is strictly ontological to one that is dialectically or existentially conformed to God's self revelation in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Barth believes that God the Son demonstrates that God does not change his divine being or attributes or will. Indeed, Barth views the incarnation as decisively dispelling any fallacious predication of change unto God's essence so, in accordance with Aquinas, Barth maintains that God, being perfect, is unchangeable.²³

1) Constancy Affirms God's Perfection

Barth accepts the classical theistic (Augustinian, Anselmian, and the Thomistic) conception of God as the most perfect being, that than which none greater can be conceived. And Barth identifies God's perfection as the primary reason why classical theists refused to predicate any mobility and change of God. Most orthodox Christians believe that, being the most perfect, God cannot gain or lose anything which he essentially has or is. But Barth does not believe that the sort of mobility that constancy assigns to God endangers God's perfection.²⁴ Rather Barth says that since God's perfection is innate, he is perfect in and of himself. Hence the movement of God cannot contribute to

²³ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 493n.

²⁴ Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, p.73. Indeed, Barth sees Anselm as not demonstrating the existence but the nature of God in the *Proslogium*. So Barth writes: In Prosl. 5-26 Anselm wants to prove the Nature of God (that means his Perfection and Unique Originality). He proves it on the presupposition of a Name of God, the meaning of which implies that the statements, 'God is perfect and originally wise, mighty, righteous, etc.,' are necessary (that is, all statements to the opposite effect are impossible).

or subtract from God's perfection. On the contrary, every other thing that exists receives existence and perfection from God.²⁵

Let me observe here briefly that Barth agrees with Aquinas that God's perfection is *non formae accidentales*, precisely because *Deus perfectionis est non per subsistens*. But unlike Aquinas who sees God's perfection as bond to immutability such that it precludes any sort of change and mobility from God,²⁶ Barth sees God's perfection as exemplified, not only in God's attributes but also, in God's acts in the world. So Barth speaks pluralistically of God's perfections or the perfections of God's life, which is made known to us in the work of salvation performed by God the Son and the Holy Spirit in the world.²⁷

Barth denies that we encounter God's perfections in an *a priori* examination of God as Being, but in our existential encounter with the Lordship of God over creation in Christ. We come to know God as the most perfect being only in his relation to the world as its Lord and Judge. As the Lord and Judge, God seeks not only to protect his perfection but he also elects to engraft others into his perfection. Hence, God commands believers to be perfect as he the Lord is perfect.²⁸ So while God's movement towards humans cannot destroy his perfection, his movement is essential for showing God as the

²⁵ Barth, *C.D.*, II/1, 334.

²⁶ Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 4. 1-3. That is, God's perfection is not formally accidental because God does not become perfect through subsistence.

²⁷ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 323.

²⁸ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 324.

holy, just, loving, all powerful, and good. God's mobility towards the world is what reveals God's being to us as one who wills and acts in the world for the redemption and perfection of his beloved people.

But if Barth's explanation of the true meaning of God's perfection is correct, then it follows that mobility can be predicated of God without thwarting God's perfections. There is no denying that Barth disagrees with Aquinas regarding the proper function of divine perfection in stating the meaning of God's immutability. According to Holmes Rolston, Barth thought that Aquinas and other older dogmaticians were dazzled by the metaphysical idea of being in their conception of God as the first principle in contrast to the potency or imperfection of creatures.²⁹ Barth writes:

It was felt necessary to ascribe a much higher dignity to the idea of the one as against that of the many -- so much higher, in fact, that in the application of this idea of the one it was thought possible to speak of God *proprie*, as though even in this case God is not spoken of *respectu nostri, pro nostri captus ratione*; as though in view of God's (own) hiddenness in His revelation it does not have to be totally conceded that our ideas -- including that of the one also -- are in themselves unsuitable and inadequate for the comprehension of God; as though on the fundamental assumption that God in His hiddenness has revealed Himself to us and has authorized us to apply our conceptual system to Him while realizing their limitations, the multiplicity of His being is not to be taken just as seriously as its unity.³⁰

Barth intimates that since perfection permeates God's being or *esse* and acts, God's mobility or relationality to the world can never diminish God's perfection. Barth believes that God's perfection can and must still be affirmed even when we predicate mobility of

²⁹Holmes Rolston, *A Conservative Look to Barth and Brunner* (Nashville, Cokesbury Press, 1933), p. 14.

³⁰Barth, *C.D.*, II/1, 334-335.

God. What is more, Barth says that God has the potential (that is, the freedom) to move towards creatures in love. For, Barth says:

By virtue of his aseity, or his glory as creator, God is all that he is, not through participation in certain potentialities not identical with his actual power; all his *potentialities* do not first require to be actualized in the reality of his power, but he is himself what he ever is and what he ever is, he is himself. Hence his *potentiality* and his reality are identical.³¹

Barth credits St. Anselm with evincing God's potential-reality or the actualized potentiality of God in his assumption of the absolute perfection than which none can be thought as the true conception of God.³² Because Barth believes that the Anselmian concept of God's perfection entails the potentiality of God in his movement towards the world, Barth states that God has the power and the freedom to be immutable and to move towards the world without that nullifying or diminishing his perfection. So Barth insists that God's perfection is extant although God moves in, through, and with the world for the good of his creatures, human beings.

Indeed, rather than mobility destroying God's perfection, Barth says that it conveys God's perfection to everything that God moves towards by transforming them into his perfection.³³ Barth is wary that in Thomism God's perfection and immutability seem to limit God such that God is not free to act or move in the world in accordance with his love. Instead Barth affirms, without fear of any negative repercussion on the

³¹ Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, p. 94.

³² Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, p. 94.

³³ Matthew 5:48.

perfect being of God, the immutability of God as well as the mobility of God towards the world in the incarnate Son and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Barth says, because God is omnipotent and immutable he strides on human history without ever marring his perfections.

2) Constancy Affirms the Unchangeable Life of God

While Barth agrees that the primary goal of God's revelation in Christ is our salvation, he also notes that, as God, Jesus gives us insights into God's life which may inform our understanding of God's immutability. Because Barth believes that God's "event," "act," or "life in freedom" as revealed in Christ can inform us about God's immutable life, Barth says:

... Our first and decisive transcription of the statement that God *is*, must be that God is who He is in the *act* of His revelation. Hence we have already repeated this sentence in our chapter heading with the concept of 'the reality of God,' which holds together being and act, instead of tearing them apart like the idea of 'essence.' ... We are in fact interpreting the being of God when we describe it as God's reality, as 'God's being in act,' namely, in the act of His revelation, in which the being of God declares His reality: not only His reality for us -- certainly that -- but at the same time His own, inner, proper reality, behind which and above which there is no other.³⁴

And Barth adds:

God is He who is this *event* in subject, predicate, and object; the revealer, the act of revelation, the revealed; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is the Lord active in this event. ... Seeking and finding God in His revelation, we cannot escape the action of God for a God who is not active. This is not only because we ourselves cannot, but also because there is no surpassing or bypassing at all of the divine action, because the transcendence of his action is nonsense. We are dealing with

³⁴Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 262.

the being of God: but with regard to the being of God, the word 'event' or 'act' is *final*, and cannot be surpassed or compromised.³⁵

Barth thinks that any explication of immutability that fails to affirm God's unalterable life renders God lifeless or dead. And given that the Scriptures reveal God as a living and self-subsistent being who sustains the world through Christ and his Spirit, Barth says our task, therefore, is to construe God's immutability in a way that is faithful to the Scriptural portrait of God as a living being who can never die or mutate. So Barth insists on our stating the livingness of God, in our explication of immutability, because "only the voice of the living is God's voice. Only the work of the living is God's work. Only the worship and fellowship of the Living is God's worship and fellowship. And only our knowledge of the Living constitutes knowledge of God."³⁶ But what does it mean to confess that God is living?

Barth says it means the following:

a) That God's life is lived in freedom to will, to love, and to act in whatever way God chooses. Indeed, Barth says, it is the freedom of living and acting in any way God chooses that establishes the subjectivity or the person of God.³⁷ For it is only persons who are free to will and to act as they choose. So by identifying God as acting in the world, Barth intends to state that God is a living person. Hence Barth says that when we speak of God as acting in revelation, we mean the being or person of God as a happening

³⁵ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 263.

³⁶ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 263.

³⁷ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 264.

in revelation.³⁸ God reveals himself to us in Christ's life who, even in his spatio-temporal existence, retained the fullness of divinity and was unchangeably identical with God the Father. Barth says that although God's being transcends temporality and it cannot be changed by God's temporal engagements; still God's free decision to become incarnate in the world exemplifies that God can live as man in the world. And God's life as man is compatible with God's immutability.³⁹

b) That God is moved by what happens in the world. Barth concurs with Augustine and Aquinas that although God's being transcends the world, as the primary efficient cause of all, God is involved in what happens in world. Barth says that it is a retrogression to understand God's aseity or transcendence as *independentia* or *infinitas*, or as *absolutas* such that God is absent from the world.⁴⁰ Indeed, while Barth agrees that for God to be God, even in the most attenuated sense of the word as a superior being, God must ontologically transcend the world, he also notes that for us to be faithful to the Scriptures, we must conceive God as intimately related to and actively involved in the world.

Because, Barth says, God is fully revealed in Christ, in Christ the *Deus esse* and the *Deus revelatus* is one divine act. So Barth construes God's sovereign-aseity as an expression of the constancy of God whose love for the world led him to become man and

³⁸ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 264.

³⁹ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 307.

⁴⁰ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 303.

to die in and for the world. And because God the Son lived and died in the world, Barth suggests that we can properly infer that immutability is in accordance with God's movement in the world.⁴¹ But if God is mobile, as Barth says, does not God's mobility negate God's immutability?

B. Examination of Barth's Concept of Divine Mobility

What does Barth mean by divine mobility? To educe Barth's concept of divine mobility, I will briefly examine three elements of his thought concerning God's immutability. These are:

1) God's Freedom, Love, and Life

Barth follows Dorner in developing the doctrine of divine mobility from the ethical freedom of God.⁴² For this reason, Barth attributes God's movement towards the world to God's ethical qualities of divine love and freedom. Indeed, Barth cautions us against focusing exclusively on our logical presuppositions regarding God's constitutive nature, properties or attributes, in our examination of immutability. Instead Barth directs our attention to the biblical expression of God's freedom and love for the world through Christ. For this reason, Barth indicts Polanus's (and other classical theistic) exposition and demonstration of God's immutability, which conflicts with God's freedom, love, and

⁴¹ Even the ordering of these attributes towards God, Barth maintains, reveals one's theological bias. So, instead of speaking of the omnipotence of God or the constancy of God, Barth urges us to say that God is omnipotent and God is constant. (Barth, *C.D.*, II/1, 490.)

⁴² See, Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 1.

life.⁴³ Barth attributes this conflict to much speculation regarding God's constitutive nature (*ipsum ens, actus simplex et perfectissimus, immensitas, primum principium et primum movens*) and little attention to the biblical assertions regarding God's ethical life. But Barth sees Augustine as approximating the truth in his identification of God's constant nature as something that exists beyond the antithesis between rest and movement.⁴⁴ Since God transcends both rest and movement, Barth says that neither movement nor rest should be played off as divine against the other as less divine. For God's rest is not to be denied out of deference to his movement nor his movement out of deference to his rest.⁴⁵ Rather Barth says that a contemplation on the biblical assertions regarding God's freedom, love and life, reveal that God is at rest in his uninterrupted continuity or unchangeableness and active movement in the world.⁴⁶

Barth warns against the conception of immutability in a manner that binds God to his eternal rest, such that God no longer has the freedom to move in the world. The living God, Barth maintains, must be free to move himself as he chooses. Barth argues,

If it is true (as Polanius and Aquinas say) that God is not moved either by anything else or by himself, but that confined as it were by his simplicity, infinity and absolute perfection, he is the pure immobile, it is quite impossible that there should be any relationship between himself and a reality distinct from himself -- or at any rate a relationship that is more than the relation of pure mutual negativity, and includes God's concern for this other reality.⁴⁷

⁴³Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 492.

⁴⁴St. Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*, XII, 17. 2.

⁴⁵Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 493.

⁴⁶Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 493.

⁴⁷Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 494.

The peril of assigning pure immobility to God, Barth says, is that it contradicts our most basic Christian assumptions, namely, the identification of God as Creator and Lord of the world. Absolute immobility also prevents our attribution of the work of reconciliation in the space-time world to God. It makes our speech about the incarnation of God's Son in the world and our claim that God is the Father and believers are his children, and our claim that God responds to our prayers vacuous.⁴⁸

To avoid this contradiction, Barth says that we must understand immutability in a manner that, while negating the possibility of something moving God, permits God to freely move himself towards the world for the sake of saving human beings. So although Barth affirms that God is immutable, he also acknowledges that God's freedom, love and life are such that God can and does move in relation to his beloved creatures on earth.

Barth says:

The real truth is -- and it is very different -- that God is 'immutable,' and this is the living God in his freedom and love, God himself. He is what he is in eternal actuality. He never is it only potentially (not even in part). He never is it at any point intermittently. But always at every place he is what he is continually and self-consistently. 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 at this point that he is the immutable God.⁴⁹

But if we allow that God moves himself freely in his relationship with creatures, what then does God's immutability mean? Barth answers:

The living God in himself is the immutable. The immutable is the fact that this God is the one he is, gracious and holy, merciful and righteous, patient and wise.

⁴⁸Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 494n.

⁴⁹Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 494.

The immutable is the fact that he is the Creator, Reconciler, Redeemer and Lord. This immutability includes rather than excludes life. In a word it is life. ... It not only has nothing whatever to do with the pagan idea of the immobile, which is only a euphemistic description of death, but it is its direct opposite.⁵⁰

It is for the purpose of affirming God's life, love, and freedom that Barth suggests that the term constancy be used instead of immutability, which is susceptible to negative connotations. Constancy not only affirms the continuity, undivertability and indefatigableness of God in himself and in his works in the world, it also affirms God's movement in himself and in his works without either losing or gaining something essential to his being.

2) From History of Salvation

Barth insists that we ought to understand and state the meaning of divine immutability in a manner that comports with the redemptive work of God in the world. For this same reason, Barth criticizes Schleiermacher's concept of God's immutability, which, in seeking to safeguard against patripassianism, makes God into an enormously impersonal power to be experienced instead of the divinely loving person that God is.⁵¹ Barth maintains that the history of our salvation casts God as a loving person who not only exhibits humility in assuming the nature of a servant but who actually suffered and died in the world. To suffer and die in the world entail change of some sort. The history of our salvation through Jesus Christ, God's Son, therefore reveals that God foreknew and willed our redemption in time.

⁵⁰Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 495.

⁵¹Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 495.

Indeed, God came into the world, endured temporal and spatial limitations, and suffered unto death for our salvation. The behooving and magnificent aspect of the Scriptural assertion that God the Son became the man Jesus Christ and lived in the world is that God, who ontologically transcends all creatures, stooped to the level of creatures by assuming human nature. Barth believes that the splendor of God's incarnation can only be affirmed if we understand the doctrine of immutability as God's constancy. For the notion of constancy assures us that God's selfhood and divine identity persist even in his incarnate state. And the notion of constancy makes it easy for us to accept the biblical claim that the immutable God became a man and dwelt for a period in our space-time world. Constancy, therefore, not only affirms the immutability of God, it also affirms God's holy mobility and elasticity. For this reason, Barth even says that, "there is such a thing as a holy mutability of God."⁵²

According to Barth, the holy mutability of God is affirmed by the doctrine of divine constancy. Holy mutability permits God to exist in space-time and to freely engage with spatio-temporal beings. Holy mutability shows God, not as disdaining human sins, but as actually entering into partnership with humans, as a father to his children for the sake of redeeming them from sin. It is a mutability that allows an intimate relationship to occur between God and his children -- where God not only talks but also listens to his children. Barth maintains that: "Neither the work of the Son nor that of the Holy Spirit is understandable if we fail to recognize the miraculous element which

⁵²Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 496.

accompanies these events [incarnation of the Son and the procession of the Holy spirit], or if we try to conjure away the miracle as such.”⁵³

So Barth coalesces the relatedness of God to the world as creator and redeemer, with the divine act of incarnation in the world, to arrive at the conclusion that God freely moves towards his creatures by bringing them into union with himself. Not only does God establish a living and loving relationship with human beings, through Christ God absorbs humanity into his vibrant and abundantly unending life. The ability to affirm God’s decision to enter into a salvific partnership with human beings is, for Barth, the most exquisite aspect of our understanding of the doctrine of immutability as God’s constancy. What is more, it enables one to state the truth of the gospel in simpler terms, namely, God loves the world so much that he became a man to save all who believe in him. Thus, says Barth,

God’s work in Jesus Christ, as the center and content, the presupposition and ground, of creation and reconciliation makes clear to us that in Jesus Christ God himself has become a creature. That is to say, He has become one with the creature, with man. He has not simply entered into a fellowship as he did in creation, causing the creature to become and be as his creature, or as he does in redemption, granting life in his perfect kingdom to his creatures. Among all the events in which God in his free love has granted his fellowship to what he has created, this event is distinguished by the fact that in it, in Jesus Christ, He becomes one with the creature. Where this creature, the man Jesus Christ, is, God himself is present: not only as the creator and lord; not only in his reconciling grace to the creature; not only as its king and helper and master; not only, then in the witness of the creature; but, in addition to all these ways, in direct attestation of himself in and with the existence of this creature.⁵⁴

⁵³Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 509.

⁵⁴Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 514.

But lest anyone assume from my elaborate quotation that Barth perceives the incarnation as abrogating God's unmovableness or immutability, let me quickly add that Barth insists that the incarnation actually reveals in stronger and more positive terms the immutability of God in his perfections. For even in the incarnate state, God is the unmovable God who nonetheless moves himself towards creatures.

Barth distinguishes between the unmovableness and the self-movement of God in freedom and love towards the world. And Barth stresses that the incarnation of the Logos, the God-manhood of Jesus Christ, does not imply any alteration in the divine being. Barth cautions against our understanding the incarnation as a declension of God from himself, a transformation of God's divine nature into another, an admixture of the divine nature with another, or a passive movement of God caused by another. Rather Barth says that the incarnation consists in God's free and loving assumption of human nature into the divine Logos for the sake of our salvation.⁵⁵

From Barth's discussion of God's incarnation as Christ, three points emerge concerning the doctrine of divine immutability as God's constancy:

(a) God freely gives of himself to the world and its history; so then God is no longer aloof from us or from our world.

(b) God, by revealing himself in Christ, has turned our attention away from speculative analysis of his being. Instead we must focus on God's own revealed answer to the

⁵⁵Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 515-517.

question of our existence in relation to himself, an answer which Barth says is both the Yes and the No of God to us in Christ.

(c) God's being is imparted to us through faith by the Holy Spirit so that our predications concerning God's being stem not from Hellenistic ontological suppositions but from the inner conviction instilled in our hearts by God's Spirit.

From these points, Barth concludes that our examination of God's immutability must conform to God's active life, in accordance with God's revelation in Christ, which the Holy Spirit impresses on our hearts. Barth applies the maxim, "what a person is can be inferred from what a person does," to God. So he says that although we cannot comprehend God's nature in itself, we can deduce God's mobility from what God does in Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ In other words, Barth assumes that God acts in accordance with his nature just as human beings act according to their nature. So just as one discerns an author's deftness by reading his lucid book or an artist's ingenuity by viewing his awe-inspiring paintings, so also can one discern God's being or character by examining his marvelous acts in the world. And Barth thinks that we can infer from God's acts in the world through His incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit that God is mobile in his relation to the world.

In summary of this section, Barth notes that God's mobility does not nullify God's immutability, because immutability pertains to God's nature, attributes, and will whereas mobility pertains to the free movement of God towards the world in love. Hence

⁵⁶Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, trans. R. B. Hoyle (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 11.

Barth states that God's self-caused motion in his acts in the world does not contradict the immutability of God's nature, attributes, and will. And because we know God through his acts in the world, Barth says that nothing is more concrete in our experience of God than that he moves or acts in the world. So while Barth concurs with Aquinas that God is pure actuality and hence that God cannot be moved by anything, Barth differs with Aquinas by also attributing mobility to God. Unlike Aquinas, who understands all motion as being in *potency* to that which it is being moved toward, Barth identifies motion as a self-caused act of God. So Barth says that to speak of God's *being-as-pure-act* is to speak of God as the living being who is moving himself towards us in Christ. In other words, Barth thinks that to speak of God as pure actuality is indeed to speak of God as mobile in Christ.

C. Theological Advantage of Constancy over Immutability

Barth identifies these two theological advantages that the term constancy has over the term absolute immutability in describing God:

1) First, constancy affirms God's perfect life, the living God, as active in the world. Here is how Barth contrasts the notion of constancy with (absolute) immutability: "In a word, constancy is life, while immutability, especially as pure immobility, is a euphemism for death."⁵⁷ According to Barth, Aquinas's claim that God is altogether immutable appears to denote death, rather than life, in God. But the notion of

⁵⁷ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 495.

constancy connotes life because, while it rightly denies that God can be moved, it also affirms that God moves himself. So Barth says that constancy better signifies what Christians want to state about God than the term absolute immutability.

2) Second, constancy allows one to affirm God's freedom to love and to move in relation to humans without that affirmation impinging on God's perfection and sovereignty. Barth notes that not every movement is mutation, so although constancy attributes movement, action, influence, affection, causation, motion and operation to God, it does not mean that God is mutable or movable or alterable or convertible or fickle or wishy-washy or vacillating. God, Barth maintains, can and does freely act and move but without altering or mutating his unalterable and immutable *being*.⁵⁸ This distinction is important because it delineates what Barth finds objectionable in Aquinas's concept of absolute immutability, namely, its claim that God is altogether immobile.⁵⁹ While Barth agrees that nothing can move God (for nothing has the power to move an omnipotent God), he sees no cogent reason for us to suppose that God cannot lovingly and freely move himself towards persons with whom he relates intimately as father and redeemer. Thus Barth avers that it is this exclusion of any and all motions from God that extraneously renders the classical or Thomistic doctrine of immutability strict and unacceptable to many modern thinkers. And through the notion of constancy, Barth hopes to expunge from God any passive mobility, which Aquinas also rightly excludes

⁵⁸Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 505.

⁵⁹Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 9, 1.

from God, and also to affirm God's self-mobility towards the world, which Aquinas excludes from God but Barth deems germane in stating God's intimate relatedness to us as our father and redeemer.

III. Brief Response to Criticisms of Barth's Notions of Constancy and Mobility

Although I plan to give a detailed evaluation of Barth's notions of immutability in chapter five, I must respond here briefly to some pertinent criticisms of Barth's notions of constancy and mobility. I think it is apparent from what I have said so far that Barth does not substitute constancy for immutability as P. Den Ottolander, Jürgen Moltmann, and Hendrikus Berkhof suggest. Berkhof says, "We think first of Karl Barth, who in his treatment of the attributes of God replaces the classical term 'immutability' by 'constancy,' because 'the pure immobile is -- death. If, then, the pure immobile is God, death is God. ... And if death is God, then God is dead.'"⁶⁰

But is Barth really replacing the classical doctrine of immutability with a doctrine of constancy? I do not think so. I think that Barth is flushing out the extreme meaning of the scholastic concept of immutability. By the notion of constancy, Barth hopes to state the distinction between mobility and immutability, such that God can be both immutable and mobile. Indeed, Barth believes that immutability is a vital theological term for stating the unalterableness of God's being, attributes, and will. But Barth rejects the assimilation of divine mobility into divine immutability, thereby understanding and stating the

⁶⁰ Hendrikus Berkhof, "The (Un) Changeability of God," in *Grace Upon Grace*, ed. James Cook (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 23.

doctrine of immutability as denying that God is mobile. Therefore to say that Barth replaces immutability with constancy is to misapprehend the central contention of Barth in his discussion of God's immutability.

Barth's central contention is this: God's unchangeable nature and will do not conflict with the biblical portrait of God as one who became the man Jesus Christ and lived in our world. Because John M. Russell misapprehends this central contention of Barth, he charges Barth with inconsistency in persisting to use the term immutability with respect to God's essence having already replaced it with constancy.⁶¹ But in actuality, Barth is pretty consistent in his affirmation of God's immutability. What Barth questions is Aquinas's explication of immutability in a manner that not only excludes the possibility of anything or circumstance moving God but also the possibility of God freely moving himself towards us in love.

Furthermore, Geoffrey Richard Lilburne and Richard Muller observe that the meaning of mobility that Barth employs, namely, as the self-motion of a person in willing and acting, is a nineteenth century idealistic concept and it is not the same notion of mobility held by medieval scholastics or Thomists. Hence, they argue that Barth's criticism of Aquinas's understanding of immutability as implying that God is purely

⁶¹John M. Russell, "Impassibility and Pathos in Barth's Idea of God," *Anglican Theological Review* (July 1988): 226. Russell quibbles, "I fail to see much semantic difference between the term unaltering Being and the Greco-Scholastic term immutability. Despite Barth's polemic against the Scholastic term immutable, he occasionally lapses into speaking about God's immutable essence." But is Russell correct in saying that Barth occasionally lapses into speaking about God's immutable essence? No, I don't think so. For Barth consistently maintain that God's essence is immutable, unalterable, unchangeable, inconvertible and similar terms, but what Barth emphatically rejects is the inclusion of the notion of immobility in God's immutability, not immutability itself.

immobile fails to apply to Aquinas. Specifically, Muller denies that the scholastic concept of immobility, which connotes the unmovableness of God, cognitively converts into the English or the present meaning of immobility, which connotes inability or incapability to move.⁶² And Lilburne says: "The mobile in Barth's exposition indicates the choosing, willing, and acting of a subject. The modern notion of intention suggests itself, so we may say that Barth's movement points to the sequence of intention moving into action."⁶³ The criticism of Lilburne and Muller is that while, for Barth, the person of God is characterized by mobility, that is, his freedom to will and act in the world, the medieval scholastics viewed mobility as the passive movement of God in locations or states of affairs.

I will make two comments about Lilburne's and Muller's criticism of Barth:

(a) I think that Lilburne and Muller have identified an important defect in Barth's reading of the tradition on immutability, namely, Barth's failure to note the shift in the meaning of immobility. Barth's oversight here leads him to sometimes speak of

⁶² Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, Classical Theism," p. 27.

⁶³ Geoffrey Richard Lilburne, "The Ontological Fabric of Karl Barth's Mature Theology: An Elucidation of a Distinctive Method," *A Dissertation Submitted to Emory University* (1976), p. 108. While Lilburne fails to support his claim by citing texts in Barth's work, his statement may be supported by Barth's negative attitude to scholastic theology, which led him instead to an expositive theology. Severally, Barth blamed the scholastic method of theology for the pitfalls of the traditional arguments concerning attribution, which he saw as reason for a rejection of metaphysical theology parallel to that of Kant. In 1940, Barth wrote regarding his doctrine of God (predestination, creation, and anthropology):

In none of these fields could I simply go along with an accepted church doctrine and theological tradition; I had to think through and develop everything anew, from a center which I considered the right one -- namely, the Old and New Testament witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ. See, Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond: John Knox, 1966), p. 60.

immobility as though he and Aquinas mean the same thing by the term, but immobility signifies a different thing for Aquinas than it does for Barth. To remove the ambiguity that the notion of mobility presents in stating the kind of change that God undergoes, I will suggest, in chapter five, that what Barth identifies as God's mobility is better stated as relational property change.

(b) But I do not think that Lilburne and Muller are entirely correct in emphasizing the shift in the meaning of immobility between the scholastics and the modern times. For indeed Aquinas was aware of this sort of motion as it was used by both Augustine and Dionysius in identifying the procession of God to us or the manifestation (epiphany) of the divine wisdom in the world as the movement of God. And Aquinas agrees with Augustine and Dionysius that through the act of willing, loving, and understanding God may be said to move himself. But Aquinas notes that the kind of movement that the doctrine of immutability denies of God is that which locates God in potency or passivity such that God is made to move by another thing or circumstance.⁶⁴

So there is actually a consensus between Barth and Aquinas that passive mobility be precluded from God, but unlike Aquinas Barth does not think that an active mobility that refers to such innate motions as willing, loving, and understanding should also be precluded from God. Indeed, Barth says that only by predicating this sort of mobility to God can we find the basis for affirming the Scriptural claim that God came into the world

⁶⁴Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 9, 1. Re. 1 & 2.

as Christ Jesus and God dwells in human hearts as the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, let me note that Barth fights on two fronts: On one front he criticizes the scholastic concept of immutability for implicitly exempting God from any movement towards human beings. But on another front Barth criticizes some of the contemporary conceptions of God's involvement in the world that deflate divinity in order to state his humanity. So Barth's notion of constancy avoids two errors that plague some recent critics of Aquinas's concept of absolute immutability. Against these contemporary views Barth affirms two things:

First, Barth's notion of constancy expels theological monism, which is the error of adducing from the relatedness of God to the world that the world is an integral part of God. Advocators of this view, such as Spinoza and Hegel, claim that there exists only one absolute substance or *Geist* from whom all things originate. They consider the world to be an outward extension of this eternal spirit or God, and the array of temporal

⁶⁵Barth, *C.D.*, II/1, 267. See also Barth, *God Here and Now*, trans. Paul Van Buren (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 20 where Barth discussed man in light of the incarnation, insisting that the consequence of incarnation is that henceforth anthropology cannot be isolated from Christology. He asks: What is man, who has such a share in this, that Jesus Christ wished man to share in Himself? What is man, man without which Jesus Christ would not be Jesus Christ, man who therefore would not exist were it not for Jesus Christ?"

occurrences as nature's inward process of returning to the eternal spirit or God – a process that will terminate at the eschaton.⁶⁶

Second, Barth expels Pan(en)theism, which asserts that all that exists is (in) God. Pan(en)theists differ from monists in that they do not identify the world as the essence of God, but they view everything as existing in God or as God existing in everything, so that what happens in the world is actually happening in God. Many post-Enlightenment scientific explications of reality fit pan(en)theism. Bergson and Whitehead are prominent twentieth century advocates of this view of God's relatedness to the world, which Charles Hartshorne adopts in his claim that every event is an occurrence in God's being, hence God's being itself is changeable.⁶⁷

Barth dismisses these two misconceptions about God's relationship to the world for failing to discern that the world is a creation of God. Barth accuses those who hold these views of blurring the important distinction between creator and creature, eternity and temporality, and infinitude and finitude. Against both misconceptions, Barth says: "The affirmation of God's constancy tells us that God is God both before and after the creation of the world, both without it and with it."⁶⁸ So, although Barth affirms the real relatedness of God to the world, he ardently denies any conception of God that would

⁶⁶Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg advocate such a view in their discussion of creation and eschatological ontology.

⁶⁷Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*; Hartshorne, *Aquinas to Whitehead: Seven Centuries of Metaphysics of Religion*, The Aquinas Lecture series (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1976).

⁶⁸Barth, *C.D.*, II/1, 500.

nullify God's sovereign-*aseitas* and transcendence over creation. For Barth, nothing is more basic in our perception of reality than that a distinction exists between God, the creator, and the world, a creation of God, and so Barth ascribes immutability to God but maintains that the world is mutable.⁶⁹

⁶⁹Barth, *C.D.*, II/1, 501.

CHAPTER FOUR

EXAMINATION OF THE SCRIPTURAL TESTIMONY CONCERNING DIVINE IMMUTABILITY

I. Introduction

It is apparent from the preceding discussion that the main point of contention in the modern debate over the correct meaning of immutability is whether the classical or Thomistic view of immutability comports with the Scriptural portrait of God. And to ascertain whether Aquinas's view of immutability comports with the Scriptural portrait of God, we must examine the Scriptural assertions about God and change or mobility. Our findings from this examination of the Scriptures will form the basis for our evaluation and judgment of the Thomistic or classical and the Barthian or modern views regarding the doctrine of divine immutability.

Let me state at the outset that some post-Enlightenment thinkers would prefer to jettison the doctrine of immutability from Christian theology. But many orthodox Christian theologians still hold tenaciously to the incorrigibility of the doctrine of immutability and appeal to the Scriptures to support their belief that God is unchangeable. Many of these orthodox Christian theologians, however, think that a softer concept of immutability coheres better with the Scriptural portrait of God as one who is intimately involved with the world. I showed, in the preceding chapter, that Barth is a leading contender that the doctrine of immutability be softened to fit the testimony of the Scriptures regarding God's relation to the world. Thus, Barth rejects Aquinas's strong conception of immutability, which claims

that God is altogether unchangeable or absolutely immobile. Rather Barth contends that while the Scriptures preclude us from predicating substantial change of God, since that would mar or abrogate God's being, the Scriptures allow us to predicate mobility of God. The central question that this chapter asks, therefore, is this: Do the Scriptures portray God as altogether unchangeable and as absolutely immobile or do the Scriptures warrant us to say that God is mobile? Can God be both immutable and mobile?

But before addressing this question, let me quickly correct a popular misconception that the doctrine of immutability derives solely from Hellenistic metaphysics and is alien to the Scriptures. Some contemporary theologians -- I am thinking of people like Wolterstorff, Hartshorne, Pinnock, Moltmann -- criticize Aquinas's doctrine of immutability as completely alien to the Scriptural witness about God.¹ Some even recommend that the doctrine of immutability be removed from Christian theology because of its Hellenistic origin. But far from being a mere piece of philosophical characterization of God, immutability is supported by the Scriptures. Indeed, Aquinas cites some biblical passages as teaching or supporting his view that God is absolutely immutable.² And Christians hold a doctrine to be orthodox (and not heterodox) if its claims correspond to or have support from the Scriptures. I think that the classical doctrine of immutability (especially as it is modified by Barth's view of constancy) states what the Scriptures say about God.

Thus, in this chapter, I will first establish the Scriptural warrant for the claim that God is immutable, so immutability is not merely an appropriation of the Hellenistic philosophical ideas about the being of God and the becoming of the world into Christianity. Also I shall establish, in this chapter, that Barth's notion of constancy has Scriptural warrant

¹See, Wolterstorff, 'God Everlasting;' Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*; Pinnock, "The Repentance of God;" Moltmann, *The Crucified God*.

²Aquinas, *S.T.*, 1a. 9. 2. Aquinas cites from, the Vulgate, the book of Wisdom 7: 24; James 4:8 and Malachi 3:6.

and it may be used to modify the classical doctrine of immutability with its notion of divine mobility. So I maintain that constancy does not merely interject the post-Enlightenment philosophical perception of reality as becoming into Christian theology.³

I turn now to the examination of the Scriptures regarding God's immutability with special attention to how Aquinas and Barth exegete the Scriptures to conform to their claims regarding immutability. Since the *raison d'être* of Christian theology is to probe and explain the teaching of Scriptures about God, I will endeavor to enunciate the Scriptural affirmations about God that inform the Christian teaching that God is immutable. But I will reject all conceptions of immutability that merely express one's religious feelings or philosophical opinions. I will therefore proceed from the maxim that only the Scriptures (not philosophy) can authenticate and validate our views about God's immutability.

A. Scriptural Warrant for the Claim That God Is Immutable

Orthodox Christian theists maintain that the Scriptures attest to God's immutability or unchangeableness. Often these theists cite such Scriptural passages as Exodus 3:14 -- where God announced his name to Moses as Yahweh, "I AM WHO I AM" -- as teaching that God is unalterable or immutable. Aquinas, for instance, sees the present tense form of the name YHWH as suggesting that there is neither past nor future in God, rather God *is* and everything is simultaneously present to God. In theological language, this is the claim that God is timeless or eternal. But how does the claim that God is timeless support God's immutability? At least two things are affirmed in the claim that God is timeless. First, in saying that God is timeless, one would be affirming that God has no temporal extension, that is, God has no duration. This is how St. Augustine states this belief: "Thy years do not come and go; while these years of ours do come and go, in order that they all might

³That view that God, if he exists, must be perpetually becoming like all other realities is subscribed to such contemporary philosophers as Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Whitehead.

come ... Thy present day does not give place to tomorrow, nor indeed, does it take the place of yesterday. Thy present day is eternal.”⁴ Second, in saying that God is timeless, one would be affirming that God has no temporal location, that is, there is no before and after with God. God does not begin to exist, he simply is. This is how St. Anselm affirms this belief: “So it is not that you existed yesterday, or will exist tomorrow, but that yesterday, today, and tomorrow, you simply are. Or rather, you exist neither yesterday, today, nor tomorrow, but you exist directly right outside of time.”⁵ We may infer from this attribution of timelessness to God that God cannot undergo temporal changes as objects that exist in time do.

To support their inference from the name YHWH that God is outside of time therefore he cannot change, classical theists further cite the Psalmist’s confession: “... But you remain the same, and your years will never end” (Ps.102: 26-28); and St. Peter’s declaration that, “with God a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day” (2 Peter 3:8). They also point to Isaiah’s question: “Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord -- with the first of them and with the last -- I am he” (Is. 41: 4). And Isaiah’s urging “Listen to me, O Jacob, Israel whom I have called: I am he; I am the first and I am the last” (48:12). They depict St. Paul as affirming the immutability of God in Romans 1:23; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16, in his insistence that God is immortal and his denunciation of the sinner’s impious conception of God in the form of humans, birds, beasts, and reptiles. Classical theists see these passages as warranting the claim that God is immutable, or, at least, that the biblical authors assumed the posture that God, unlike creatures, exists outside of time. Time seems to connote both transience and subordination, but the Scriptures maintain God’s permanency and superiority or aseity. And since God is not in time, what is true of objects that exist in time

⁴St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book IX, Ch. 13.

⁵St. Anselm, *Proslogion*, 19.

(such as coming into existence and passing away) cannot be applied to God. So, classical theists understood the name YHWH (I am who I am) as signifying that God is immutable.

Furthermore, classical theists stipulate that the Scriptures warrant the predication of immutability to God in their depiction of God as one who is ontological distinct from and transcendent of creatures. This is how the writer of Hebrews contrasts God from creatures: “They [creatures] will perish, but you remain. They will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe. Like a garment, they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.” (Heb. 1: 11-12). The writer of James acquiesces: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change” (James 1:17). And in contrast to creatures who change, the writer of Malachi depicts God as unchangeable, in his declaration: “I am the Lord, I do not change” (Malachi 3:6a).

From these biblical texts and other less pronounced texts orthodox Christian theologians deduce that the Scriptures indeed teach that God is immutable. They did of course acknowledge that different authors of the books of the Bible emphasized different aspect of “God’s immutability,” but overall the notion that God is in some sense changeless is firmly imbedded in the Scriptures. So classical theists view the Scriptures as teaching that God is immutable. And I do not dispute that these texts teach that God is immutable, but I question whether they teach that God is *altogether* unchangeable, as Aquinas maintains. These texts assert only that God’s nature (esse, attributes, and will) is unchangeable, but they allow other texts of Scriptures to affirm that God is actively involved in changeable states of affairs in the world, which suggests that God is mobile or *relationally* changeable, as Barth contends.

I think that to really grasp the expanse of the Christian conviction that the Scriptures teach that God is immutable, one must survey the interpretation of the Scriptures by some of the leading Christian theologians in support of divine immutability.

B. Survey of Biblical Interpretation by Some Major Theologians to Support Immutability

A number of theologians accept the comments of Philo, a Jewish Platonist whose religious thought had greatly influenced the Fathers of the Church in their development of Christian dogmas, that God is immutable, because it is irreligious to speak of God as changeable or flickering.⁶ For Philo and many Christian theologians, the proper religious disposition towards God is to maintain the constancy and endurance of God who in his pure perfection cannot be thought as changing or repenting. Bertrand Russell notes that Philo's conception of God's perfection and the religious necessity to conceive God as immutable set the standard for interpreting the Scriptures to fit divine immutability in the Western church. Indeed, the statements of Origen, Ambrose, and Jerome regarding God's immutability were greatly influenced by Philo.⁷ It is, therefore, quite understandable that, commenting on Numbers 23:19 ("God is not man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind. Does he speak and not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"), Origen says: "God is not confounded like man nor is he frightened like a son of man; hence God cannot change his mind out of confoundation or fright as human beings sometimes do."⁸

Similarly, St. Augustine exegetes Ps. 106:45 ("For their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented"), a passage that appears to attribute repentance to God, as actually stating God's immutable faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham to save his descendents. St. Augustine also explains Psalm 132:11 ("The Lord swore an oath to David, a sure oath that he will not revoke...") as stating the immutable

⁶David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 3.

⁷Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 322.

⁸Migne, *Patrologiae Graecae*, 12, 691f.

faithfulness of God to his covenant with David to place one of his descendents on the throne as king of Israel.⁹

Agreeing with Augustine, John Calvin says that repentance cannot be attributed to God literally, because the Scriptures present God as one who foreknows and forewills everything in eternity. One who eternally knows and wills everything has a simultaneous view of everything; hence he needs not repent. Calvin rejects the literal interpretation of the Scriptural passages that attribute suffering or grief or sorrow to God. He considers a literal interpretation of these passages irreligious for it renders God who is in eternal bliss and repose as emotionally pendulant or oscillating. Instead, Calvin interprets biblical references to God's grief or sorrow as the metaphorical expression of God's aversion for our sin. Calvin also interprets God's withdrawal of some of his threats to destroy Israelites in response to Moses' intercession (Ex. 32:12-14) as affirming the immutable faithfulness of God to his covenant with Abraham to save his descendants.

But Calvin also recognizes our inclination to say that God changed his mind because the Scriptures portray God as refraining from carrying out some of his threats. Still Calvin maintains that our inclination is erroneous because in actuality: (1) these passages point to God's mysterious decision to remain faithful to his covenant, not to deviate from it by annihilating Abraham's descendants. And (2) these passages show that God freely pardons sin and commits himself to his plan for the world.¹⁰ I will not contend with Calvin's explanation, but I will observe that Calvin's points here underscore our misgiving with absolute immutability for seeming to bind God to his unchangeableness. It seems to me that Calvin recognizes that some of God's actions do not neatly fit the view that God is absolutely immutable, or, to say the least, they cannot logically be maintained

⁹ Cf. Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, 37, 1416.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, XVII.13-14.

along with absolute immutability without contradiction. Hence Calvin assigns them to the rubric of God's mysterious and free acts.

Most post Reformation theologians concur with Calvin that the Scriptures depict God as immutable and they interpret Scriptural references to God's repentance metaphorically. Thus, for example, in response to objections against immutability on grounds that the Scriptures say God repents, Zacharius Ursinus says that the Scriptures attribute repentance to God figuratively.¹¹

Similarly, Francis Turretin interprets Scriptural passages that appear to attribute penitence to God (such as Genesis 6:6-8) as speaking of God in the manner of men (*anthropopathos*), but not in the manner of God (*theoprepos*). Turretin warns against any construance of penitence pathetically (*pathetikos*), as stating that God suffers or is distressed. Rather, he suggests that God's penitence should be understood energetically (*euergetikos*), as stating God's benevolent act of dispensing grace unto human beings.¹²

Yet it is worth noting that Turretin's interpretation of the Scriptures in support of immutability distinguishes between God's change of mind (*ad intra*) and God's willingness to change things (*ad extra*). Turretin asserts that although God's will in itself is unchangeable, God's willingness to bring about certain states of affairs in the world does change as the Scriptures rightly attest. In this distinction and assertion, Turretin appears to concede that although God's will is immutable, God is free to change his acts in the world. This is how Turretin states the argument:

Now, when God became the Creator, he was not changed in himself (for nothing new happened to him, since from eternity he had the efficacious will of creating the world in time), but only in order of his relation to the creature.¹³

¹¹Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., 1851), p. 126.

¹²Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 206.

¹³Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 206.

I think that Turretin's admission that, in creating the world, God enters into new *relations* with creatures further illustrates the post-Reformation unsettledness with absolute immutability while showing a preference for a softer version of immutability.¹⁴

Stephen Charnock, the 17th Century English divine, also interprets the Scriptures as stating that God is immutable. Charnock warns against our understanding of those Scriptural passages that attribute repentance to God as teaching that God changes his will capriciously as humans do. Rather Charnock maintains that God's decisions are immutable; hence whatsoever God promises he must do.¹⁵ Still Charnock concedes that the Scriptures speak of God's change of mind or repentance, not in reference to his immutable will, but in reference to the things that he wills their change. This is how Charnock states the point:

Though the will of God be immutable, yet it is not to be understood so, as that the things themselves so willed are immutable. ... So that the changing of those things which he had once appointed to be practiced, is so far from charging God with changeableness, that God would be mutable if he did not take them away.¹⁶

Other reputable systematic theologians such as Charles Hodge, William G. T. Shedd, A. H. Strong, Herman Bavinck and Louis Berkhof also echo Calvin's contention that the Scriptures attribute immutability to God, but also add that immutability does not conflict with the Scriptures's figurative or anthropomorphic claim that God repents. They refrain from interpreting these texts literally as stating that God is changeable.¹⁷ For instance, they interpret Numbers 15:22-29 as stating God's willingness to withhold his conditional threats if the sinner repents and offers the prescribed sacrifice. To reinforce that

¹⁴Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 205.

¹⁵Charnock, *Discourses Upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, p. 325.

¹⁶Charnock, *Discourses Upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, p. 325.

¹⁷L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

God's unconditional threats will be fulfilled they appeal to 1 Samuel 15:29, where Samuel declares: "He [God] who is the glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind." So they distinguish God's conditional threats, whose fulfillment depends on the sinner's responsive conduct, from God's unconditional promises, whose fulfillment do not depend on the sinner's responsive conduct, as in Romans 11:1, 29; Psalm 138:8 and Philippians 1:6.

Now, the subliminal point in these interpretations of the Scriptures in support of God's immutability is the subtle admission by most of these theologians that the Scriptural portrait of God entails a softer understanding of immutability. These theologians conclude that the doctrine of God's immutability is indeed taught in the Scriptures, but they also acknowledge that the Scriptures speak, albeit anthropomorphically or anthropopathetically, about God's repentance. One cannot ignore the Scriptural attestation to God's timelessness and unchangeableness, but neither can one ignore the Scriptural affirmation to God's direct involvement with spatio-temporal entities that perpetually change. But the tendency of classical theists, like Aquinas, is to interpret the Scriptural affirmations about God's anger metaphorically by denying that anger is what God experiences. Yet when they encounter metaphorical descriptions of God as the Rock, they apply the unmoveableness of the rock literally to God as supporting absolute immutability.¹⁸ Yet to construe the Scriptures as supporting the teaching that God is absolutely immutable is to obliterate other important Scriptural assertions regarding God's direct acts in the world and his personal relationship with humans, which is characterized by love and freedom to act in the world.¹⁹

¹⁸ Aquinas, *S. T.*, 1a. 9. 1, 3; Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 492n.

¹⁹ Henri Blocher, "Divine Immutability," in *The Power and Weakness of God*, ed. Nigel M. De S. Cameron (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1990), p. 5. Although Barth does not give the criteria for classifying Scriptural statement as metaphorical or literal expression regarding God, Henry Blocher suggests the following: 1) One must weigh if that statement, taken literally, would contradict other statements; and 2) whether the tone or style of the context increases or lessens the probability of that statement being true, specifically if we can ascertain the author's intent or scope. A good example is when the Scriptures employs bodily parts (say, hands or facial countenance) to describe God.

I think that to retain the authentic voice of the Scriptures, a Christian ought to acknowledge the Scriptural depiction of God as immutable and as actively involved with human beings in their passions and changes. Our theological duty therefore is to state the doctrine of God's immutability in a way that allows us to affirm both God's unchangeableness and his active involvement with us in this world.

II. Scriptural Warrant for the Claim that God is Mobile

A. How Some Theologians Interpret the Scriptures in Support of Immobility

1) The Personal Relationship of God to Humans

The most basic and important fact about the Scriptural portrait of God, from our viewpoint as human beings, is that God is a person with whom we can enter into a personal relationship. But what is required for a relationship to be personal? Obviously many things, but above all it must have two distinctive persons. Since one cannot have a personal relationship with a non-personal object such as a stone, the Scriptural claim that God created humans in his image and he brings them into relation with him entails that God and humans are persons. It is to contrast the personhood of God with the pagan material deities that Christianity, like Judaism before it, insists that God is a person (Cf. Lk. 10:21-22; 11:11-13; 15:11-23; Jn. 6:55-58; 14:16-21; 15:15-16; 16:25-27; Rom. 8:14-17; Heb. 4:15-16). Of course, God is not a person in the same sense that a human being is a person. For this reason the Scriptures contrast between God as a divine or spiritual person and humans as created persons. Still, the Scriptures say that God is intimately related to humans and the world as creator and redeemer and friend so that every human occurrence in the world relates to and is permitted by God. Hence much of what occurs to human beings in the world is owed to God's immediate or direct interaction with humans. This is why the Scriptures depict God as engaging in fellowship with Adam and Eve, not only in Eden but even after the fall (Gen. 3:8-24).

The implication of God's personal relationship with human beings for the doctrine of divine immutability is profound. For one thing, personal relationships exist only where there is reciprocity between two parties. So perhaps we can say that some of our human actions do indeed affect God. As the Scriptures say, for example, the sin of Adam and Eve had caused God great pain such that he banishing humans from Eden (Gen. 6:6). At other occasions too, the Scriptures describe God as having become angry because of the sins of his people (Numbers 11:1, 10; Psalm 106:40; Zechariah 10:3); or that God's anger had depleted because his people had again returned to pursue righteousness (Deuteronomy 13:17; 2 Chronicles 12:12, 30:8; Jeremiah 18:8, 10; 26:3). Furthermore, the Scriptures depict God as punishing sins of his foes through the third and the fourth generations (Nahum 1:1-3), while loving those who keep his commandments through a thousand generations (Exodus 20:6; Proverbs 11:20; 12:22). Although God's truths cannot be determined merely by statistics, it is worth noting, as Lester J. Kuyper does, that on twenty-four instances the Scriptures state categorically that God repents or regrets over the sins of his people.²⁰ What this means is that God has a negative attitude towards (or he is affected by) the sins that his people commit. These are responsive acts of God to the actual sins committed by humans in time. God is not just responding to the potential of human beings to commit sins, which exists eternally, but to the actual committing of these sins in the world by temporal beings.

2) God's Answer to Petitionary Prayer

The Scriptures depict God as one who responds to prayers and who urges humans to pray to him for their needs. One can argue that it is of little value for God to ask his people to petition him if his plans for them are eternally fixed and absolutely unchangeable. In order to respond to requests, the responder must have some sort of relationship to the request and the petitioner. If this were not the case, then prayer would merely be a

²⁰Lester J. Kuyper, "The Repentance of God," *Reformed Review* 18 (1965): 5.

monologue by the individual and not a dialogue between the individual and God. To use William Alston's analogy, prayer would be a charade as a dialogue between a ventriloquist and her puppet.²¹ But the Scriptures portray God as responding to the prayers that his people make to him. And His people are said to have perceived God as *sometimes* changing their circumstances in response to their prayers to him (Exodus 32:10-14; Jonah 3:10). So God's favorable response to the prayers of his people intimates that God's benevolent disposition to ameliorate the plight of his people in the time-space world, if asked. For this reason God urges his people to petition him saying: "seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you, ask and you will receive" (Matthew 7:7). This is how St. Luke states Jesus' assurance that God will answer our prayers:

For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him? (Luke 11:9 KJV).

And Jesus promised his disciples: "If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14). We can say then that when the righteous petition God, he responds favorably and graciously by granting their petitions, most of the time.

For this reason Christians do not view prayer as a charade but as an intimate discourse with God aimed at prompting God to grant their requests. Often Christians do not let their belief in God's immutability subvert their belief that God loves them enough to listen and to answer their prayers. Hence they petition God about all sorts of issues and they testify that God *answers* their prayers. Not only do Christians petition God concerning their salvation, they also petition him concerning mundane affairs of life to which God nonetheless responds favorably. For example, in the first book of Samuel, Hannah petitions God for a child, specifically wanting a boy to silence her mockers and to

²¹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 184; See also, Jon F. X. Knasas, "Prayer to an Immutable God," *New Scholasticism* 57 (1983): 196-221.

dispel her shame of barrenness, and God gave her a boy, Samuel. Similarly, St. Luke reports that an angel informed Zechariah that: "... Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John." (Lk. 1:13). Also, as punishment to king Ahab, Elijah asked God to hoard rain for three years and after three years Elijah again asked God to release rain, which God did. These texts illustrate, it seems to me, that God wills for Christians to ask him to act one way or the other.

Now, I see the facts about God's response to our prayer as supporting the thesis that God wills himself to be moved by our prayers to act in ways that accord with his eternal will for the world. And this thesis appears to be affirmed by Soren Kierkegaard's exegesis of James 1:17, a text that Aquinas cites in support of absolute immutability, as not only stating God's unchangeableness but also as stating God's willingness to be moved by what concerns his people. Confessing God's willingness to be moved, Kierkegaard says:

Even what we human beings call an insignificant trifle, and pass by unmoved, the need of a sparrow, even this moves Thee; and what we so often scarcely notice, a human sigh, this moves Thee, O Infinite Love! ... O Thou who in infinite love dost submit to be moved, may this our prayer also move Thee to add Thy blessing...²²

Kierkegaard shows in this passage, as Barth does later, a distinction between divine immutability and mobility, so that while he affirms God's immutability he does not see immutability as negating God's willingness to move in response to our prayers.

Peter Geach also states that in answering prayers, God exhibits a change of "mind." Geach sees God's change of "mind" or plan as indicative of what it means for God to answer prayers, so he says:

If a state of affairs S came about as a result of someone's (petitionary) prayer, then S must have had a two-way contingency: it could come about, it could also not come about. God can answer petitionary prayer only in a world of two-way contingency. So, for God to answer petitionary prayer God must first will that A, and based on someone's prayer God then wills that not-A.²³

²²Soren Kierkegaard, "The Unchangeableness of God," (1855), in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 470.

²³Geach, *God and the Soul*, pp. 86-99.

Now one may argue, as Aquinas does, that God foreknew these petitions and he willed eternally to grant them in response to our actual prayers.²⁴ But Geach retorts that, by definition, for an act to be in response to a petitionary prayer it cannot be determined before the petition is made. So, says Geach, if a man would have done something, was going to do something, even unasked, then we cannot legitimately say that he did the thing because he was asked. Of a father, let's say, who has decided to give his son a pony for a birthday, and does so, we can say he was going to give him a pony anyway; but we cannot then say that the father gave the pony *because* the boy asked for it.²⁵

Geach distinguishes between the mind of God and its content, and he notes that the phrase "God's change his 'mind'" does not refer to God's 'faculty' of willing (that by which God forms and shapes his plans) but to the content of God's will (those intricate information in God's will). With this distinction Geach hopes to avoid transgressing God's immutability in his assertion that our prayers sometimes move God to act. But Geach maintains that, "God gives us some things, not only *as* we wish, but *because* we wish."²⁶

I think it is fair to stipulate here that the Scriptural intuition is that God sometimes moves in response to our prayers, especially when they are in accordance with his will. But even when God does not move to grant our petitions we can still learn from his denial what

²⁴ Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, III, 1f.

²⁵ Geach, *God and the Soul*, p. 86.

²⁶ Geach, *God and the Soul*, p. 87. Geach clarifies his distinction between contingency of action versus substance in this passage:

I am not saying that God is changeable, that he has different information available at different times; but I am saying that God sees creatures *as* changing and *as* being in different states at different times, because that is the way things are and God sees things as they are. Moreover, though God's knowledge is unchangeable, *we* have to use different propositions at different times in order to say *what* God knows. ... Similarly, though the arm of the Lord is not made short, it is false to say whatever God was able to bring about he still is able to bring about or whatever prayer God could have granted he still can grant. ... For once a situation belongs to the past, to the region of *fait accompli*, it no longer comes under the notion of conceivably accomplishable -- even for God. (Geach, *God and the Soul*, p. 93).

his will is regarding those things that we are petitioning him about. I do not, however, think that we should conclude that God had predetermined to grant or deny our request even before we made it. Rather we can say with Barth that God responds to our request with a divine “No,” which often correlates to a divine “Yes” to pious things that are in accord with his will.

3) Worship and Praise

In addition to petitionary prayers, many Christians believe that their worship and praise bring joy to God. And they cite the Scriptures as enjoining Christians to worship and praise God because God delights in our worship and adoration. The Psalmist, for example, commands believers and every creature to praise God because God delights in praises (Psalm 103:20-22; Psalm 69:34). The Scriptural portrait of God as one who delights in our worship and praises calls into question the Thomistic projection of God as one who is altogether nonchalant about our praise and adoration. Indeed, the prodding by biblical authors that we worship and praise God is meaningful only if God delights in our worship and praises. And if God enjoys our praises and worship (as I believe he does) then God has feelings and pathos, which move relatively to human actions in the world.

B. Scriptural Witness to Changing States of Affairs Initiated by God

The Scriptures also witness to certain states of affairs that God brings about in the world that exemplify God’s basic or direct acts in the world, which indicate that God is mobile. By “basic acts” I mean those actions that God directly performs in our world without any mediative apparatus. Indeed, some may say that all of God’s actions in the world are basic,²⁷ but more restrictively I am thinking of such acts as the incarnation of God the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit in the world.

²⁷ See: Alston, “Can We Speak Literally of God?” in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 58.

1) The Incarnation

The Bible attests that in the fullness of time God became man, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, to redeem humans from sin (Gal.4:4). The Scriptures present the Incarnation, first of all, as God's direct act of love on behalf of sinners (James 4:8). So John 3:16 says "God loves the world that he gave his only Son so that whosoever believes in him shall be saved from sin." But what exactly does it mean for God to express his love for the world? It means, as St. Paul reminds us, that God endured suffering and death in the person of God the Son on earth (1 Cor. 13:7). The Scriptures present Jesus Christ as the very God, the begotten Son of God, who, in the incarnate state, assumed human nature and dwelt in this world for a period. St. John 1:1-14 testifies:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

We can deduce from the testimony of St. John that God, in the person of the eternal Son, revealed himself as one who suffers and dies to absorb human suffering, and to absolve human sins so as to reconcile humans to himself.

Since Jesus Christ is the ultimate revealer of God to the world, we can infer at least two things from his incarnate existence on earth. First, we can infer that God the Son remains ontologically constant throughout the incarnate period because he retained the divine substance or essence. Nevertheless, because of the incarnation, we can also say that God the Son assumed human form and matter, which made him susceptible to change and movement. Indeed to repel evil in the world God had to sacrifice himself on the cross of Calvary, which exemplifies the highest form of mobility that involves Christ's transition from the state of glory to the state of humiliation. Second, we can infer from God's love for humans that he initiates a personal union with us through the Holy Spirit. The Scriptural claim that God's Spirit dwells in human hearts testifying to them about God's love. Both the Scriptural account of Christ's incarnation and the procession of the Holy Spirit,

therefore, portray God as one who is directly and personally related with humans in the world to redeem and sanctify them.

2) Procession of the Holy Spirit

The Scriptures, furthermore, attest to the procession of God the Spirit into the world: Speaking to the disciples about the Holy Spirit, Jesus says: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another counselor to be with you forever -- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot see him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you" (St. John 14:16-17). Jesus stipulates that the work of the Holy Spirit in the world is to instruct the heart of believers about God's law and love, to remind believers about everything that Jesus had spoken, and to spur humans to work for God's kingdom (St. John 14:25-26).

While Scriptures identify the primary work of the Holy Spirit as guiding, inspiring, enlightening, and teaching the believer (Gal. 5:22-25); an equally important work of God the Spirit is to empower believers to witness to Christ's work of redemption for sinners and the procurement of their salvation (Acts 1:4-8). So, God's Spirit performs basic acts in the world to bring about God's kingdom on earth. God's Spirit is directly working in the church, knitting its members together in fellowship and love, guiding its decisions and interceding for the church before God in groaning that cannot be uttered (Romans 8:11, 16-18, 26-27).

That the work of God the Spirit in the world is to regenerate (to transform evil hearts), to sanctify individuals, and to unite them in a godly community that reflect God's glory on earth is underscored in this prayer of Jesus to God the Father:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one as you, Father are in me and I in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23).

An integral part of God's work, therefore, continues to be the up building of the Christian community in the world. William James attests that God continues to work in the world through his Spirit.²⁸ Even though James's characterization of religions is a bit misguided, he is correct in saying that the religious advances one makes in love, patience, kindness, faithfulness, and other fruits of the Spirit are not mere aspects of the individual's feelings, acts, and experiences in solitude, but the result of standing in relation to the divine.²⁹

I think James is right in recognizing that the church is intimately related to God and that God is related to the church in its spatio-temporal existence. What is more, the Scriptures identify God as the head of the church on earth. In other words, God is the supreme controller and director of the church and its activities on earth. For this reason the Scriptures say that God freely enters into a loving relationship with the Church to foster its faith and to empower it to perform God's duties in the world. Aquinas also assents that the Spirit of God continues to tutor and to instruct believers about God's will, in this declaration: "... And what is more wonderful, there is the inspiration given to the human minds, so that simple and untutored persons, filled with the Holy Spirit, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom and the readiest eloquence."³⁰

Now, if we view the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, not primarily as the work of the third person of the Trinity but as the work of God or Godhead, then this will strengthen my thesis that we need to understand immutability in softer terms that permits God to act in the world. I think that a softer understanding of immutability will allow us to uprightly conceptualize God in accordance with the Scriptural testimony that God dwells in human hearts and he is interactively working out changes (regeneration and sanctification) in them daily. Furthermore, it would allow us to freely affirm that the work of the Holy

²⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1936), p. 31.

²⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 32.

³⁰ Aquinas, *S. C. G.*, I, 6.

Spirit in human hearts is in direct response to Jesus' weighty prayer: "Father, just as you are in me and I in you, may they be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."³¹

Still, I do not intend for my conclusion that the incarnation and the procession of the Holy Spirit depict God as directly and personally related to humans in the world to negate the basic Christian belief that God transcends and is independent of the material world so God is immutable. And neither does Barth think that the incarnation renders God non-transcendent or dependent on his assumed human nature. But since the Scriptures attest that the incarnation and the procession of the Holy Spirit are temporal events of Godhead for the sake of saving humans in the world, to be truthful to this Scriptural depiction of God we must try to understand and state the doctrine of immutability in terms that do not obfuscate God's incarnation and the procession of the Holy Spirit in our spatio-temporal world.³² And granting that every temporal event involves change of some sort, we may be justified in asserting that both the incarnation and the procession of the Holy Spirit, as divine acts in time, connote change of some sort for God the Son, who became God-man, and God the Spirit, who dwells in human hearts. So, we can infer from the Scriptural affirmation regarding the incarnation and the procession of the Holy Spirit that it is not improbable for God to be mobile.

It is already apparent from our ideation and articulation of God's mobility as coherent with immutability that we have adopted a different hermeneutical principle from that of Aquinas in our exegesis of the Scriptures regarding the doctrine of immutability. But in order that this may be evident, I shall now state and evaluate the new hermeneutical principle that warrants our predication of immutability and mobility to God.

³¹ John 17:21.

³² Barth, *C. D.*, IV/2, 85.

III. Evaluating the Hermeneutical Principles of Barth and Aquinas

There is a slight difference in the hermeneutical principles of Aquinas and Barth regarding the Scriptural teaching about God's immutability. The difference hinges on epistemology, specifically the answer to the question: how do we know God? Aquinas proceeds from the supposition that much of our knowledge of God is inferred *via negativa* from our knowledge of the world. Hence Aquinas interprets the Scriptural references to God's mobility analogically. Aquinas sees analogy as an appropriate linguistic tool used by the authors of Bible to speak about God in terms that human beings can grasp. So Aquinas says that although God is *altogether* unchangeable, biblical authors sometimes spoke metaphorically of God in terms that suggest God changes. "Accordingly," Richard Muller says, "despite the seeming appearance from these passages of affirming that God changes, Aquinas interpreted these texts, and other similar texts, as bearing witness to an ethical or moral, intentional or volitional changelessness in God."³³

Barth, like other modern theologians, also acknowledges the Scriptural use of analogies in speaking about God, but he denies that biblical authors use metaphors solely as a linguistic device to portray God in terms that humans can understand. Rather Barth sees biblical analogies as revealing what is real or actual about God to us. Barth sees the Scripture's analogical statements to God's free and loving relationship with us in the world as revealing a real change around and about God. Therefore, Barth rebuffs any conception of God's immutability that annuls the biblical affirmation that God freely moves toward us in the world. Barth says:

It is not, then, a figurative but a strictly literal statement, and one which does not contradict but bears testimony to the constancy of God, when we are told in Psalm 18:25ff.: "With the merciful thou wilt show thyself merciful; with the perfect man thou wilt show thyself perfect; with the pure thou wilt show thyself pure; and with

³³ Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism," p. 26. Cf. Pegis, ed. *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, p. 70.

the froward thou wilt show thyself froward.” This is the way in which the immutable and as such the living God acted.³⁴

Furthermore, Aquinas and Barth agree that if God were really related to humans in the world, then God would have to relate with their temporal changes as well. But Aquinas denies that God is really related to the world, so God is not affected by changes that humans undergo in the world.³⁵ Whereas, Barth affirms the real relatedness of God to the world, so he says that although God is immutable, immutability does not prevent God’s life, which possesses mobility or elasticity, from entering into changeable relations with humans in the world.³⁶ Indeed, Barth understands the centrality of the biblical message of salvation (in the Old and New Testaments) as teaching the loving relatedness of God to us in Jesus Christ. For example, Gen. 18:20ff depicts God as entering into a covenant relationship with Abraham that obliged him to inform Abraham of his decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and to listen to Abraham’s intercession for the righteous in that city. In Deuteronomy 32 we see Moses utilizing his unique relationship with God to arbitrate for the apostate Israelites whom God had threatened to destroy; and God receded his threat against his people. The same is true of Amos 7:1-6; Jeremiah 18:1-10; Romans 9:21ff; Jonah 4:2; and Psalm 18:20ff. The sublimity of Barth’s interpretation of the Scriptures is that he balances those texts which teach that God is mobile (that is, he does not subvert or suppress them to) with those texts that say God is unchangeable. So Barth says:

It is not really the case that Numbers 23:19, which says that God is not the son of man that he should repent, is qualified or indeed denied and canceled by the numerous other passages in which God does in fact repent of having promised, threatened or even done something, and in which he in a sense retracts either once or many times, and sometimes goes on to retract his retraction, returning to what he had originally said or done.³⁷

³⁴ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 496.

³⁵ Aquinas, *S. T.*, 1a, 28. 1-3.

³⁶ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 496.

³⁷ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 496.

And Barth sees biblical authors as juxtaposing these two facts about God, which require our affirmation: First, biblical authors reveal that God's immutability does not abrogate God's compassion towards us exemplified in his participation in our grief, sorrow and peril. Second, biblical authors reveal that God's immutability does not abrogate God's gracious work of redemption, which is his disposition to suffer on behalf of sinners. In other words, biblical authors do not construe God's immutability as constrictive of God's act of redemption accomplished in Christ through his participation in our humanity, suffering, and death to repel our sins. Thus, Barth perceptively balances biblical references to God's mobile acts such as repentance with biblical references to God's unchangeableness without subverting one set of references.

Indeed, Barth judges as most unsagacious the tendency to understand all biblical statements attributing repentance to God as mere figurative expressions. He says:

It would be just as foolish to try to see in the *alteration* which is certainly contained in the idea of repentance only an alteration in man in his relation to God, but not an alteration in God in his relation to man. Of course, in so far as this relationship rests on an attitude of God's, it is *immutable* in the sense that it is always and everywhere God's relationship to man, the being and essence of the One who loves in freedom. Yet it would not be a glorifying, but a blaspheming and finally a denial of God, to conceive of the being and essence of this self-consistent God as one which is, so to speak, self-limited to an inflexible immobility, thus depriving God of the capacity to *alter* his attitudes and actions.³⁸

I take what Barth says here as suggesting that Aquinas's concept of absolute immutability fails to properly separate God's immutable nature from God's mobility in Jesus Christ for the sake of our redemption. This failure results in Aquinas understanding the Scriptural teaching about God's immutability as implying the immobility of God. Employing a different hermeneutical principle from Aquinas, however, allows Barth to interpret the Scriptures as affirming both God's immutability and mobility.

In sum, Barth views the Scriptures as clearly positing that God is immutable and mobile. And Barth maintains that although immutability may appear to us to be antithetical

³⁸Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 498.

to mobility, given that the Scriptures assigns both concepts to God they must be understood as synthetic in God who is free to be immutable and mobile. Thus, Barth contributes to the scholastic or Thomistic interpretation of the Scriptures regarding God's immutability a balanced interpretation of biblical texts that affirm God's unchangeableness and the movement of God towards the world.

A. The Exegetical Conclusion that Immutability is Constancy

It is not hard to see why most modern Christians, even those in the Thomistic line, have sought to preserve both the immutability of God and the mobility of God. The reason is that both are taught in the Scriptures. Moreover there are some negative theological effects in precluding mobility from God, which we must overcome by adopting the notion of constancy. Although the core objective of hermeneutics is to illuminate the Scriptures³⁹ yet, because we can only read and interpret the Scriptures from our experiences, our exegetical conclusions must also reflect our cumulative experience of God in our intellectual and religious development. I do not intend to make our experience of God the sole basis for justifying our exegesis of the Scriptures -- that would trivialize Christian theology -- but, in positive terms, we stand on the shoulders of past theologians and we can enrich our understanding of immutability by appropriating their insights and experience with God into our understanding of the Scriptural witness to God's immutability. Indeed, as it is necessary that Christian theology address the modern intellectual perception of the cosmic order and its relation to God, Christians must strive to not only speak truthfully about God but also to articulate Christian dogmas in terms that have relevance and meaning to the modern person.

³⁹ Cf. Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, series ed. John Wild (Evanston: Northwestern University press, 1969), pp. 242-253.

So, perhaps, before the Enlightenment no theologian could have interpreted the Scriptures with emphasis on divine mobility based on Scriptural text that depict God as freely and lovingly related to the world (even Calvin hesitates to support it) without risking the charge of heresy. But in the post-Enlightenment era most orthodox Christian theologians deem it necessary, on the basis of such Scriptural texts, to state the doctrine of immutability as permitting divine mobility. Hence the apparent consensus among post-enlightenment orthodox Christian theologians that the Scriptures teach that God is immutable and mobile.⁴⁰

Not only Barth but also Emil Brunner, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Jürgen Moltmann interpret the Scriptures as stating that God is mobile or actively involved in the world's motions. Even Reformed theologians of good conservative pedigree like Herman Bavinck and Loius Berkhof concur that, while immutable in himself, God creates and relates intimately to humans in their mutable existence such that those who repudiate divine mobility on the basis of immutability may be confounding the Christian doctrine of immutability with the Hellenistic notion of absolute immutability. Instead of construing immutability as negating the predication of any and all movement to God, Berkhof affirms that in God there are *relational* changes -- which the Bible teaches in the claim that God enters into manifold relations with men and, as it were, lives their life; so there is change round about God -- change in the relations of men to Him.⁴¹ Here is how Bavinck juxtaposes God's immutability with God's mobility:

Though eternal in himself, he is immanent in time; that he, though transcending all spatial relations, is present in every point of space; that he, though he is absolute essence is able to give a distinct existence to transient beings. Completely absent

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Alston's *Divine Nature and Human Language*, pp. 197-199, where Alston insists that the direct involvement of God with human beings entails that God communicates his messages to them, judges them, forgives them, sustains them, enlightens or guides them; while his public displays such as parting the waters of the Sea of Reeds, sending the plagues on Egypt, and raising the dead to life all demonstrate God's causal relationship to temporal changing state of affairs.

⁴¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 58.

from God's eternity is every moment of time; from his immensity every point of space; from his being, every element of becoming. But conversely, it is God who is immanent in the creature; eternity, in time; immensity, in space, being, in becoming, immutability, in change. ... Because of his majesty divine, God is able to condescend to the level of the creature. Though transcendent, he is able to be immanent in every creature; while preserving himself, he is able to give himself; and likewise also though absolutely maintaining his immutability, he is able to sustain an infinite number of relations to his creatures.⁴²

Clearly Bavinck understands the Scriptures as stating both God's transcendence of and immanence to the world. So Bavinck says that God's immutability does not prevent God from entering into changeable relations with creatures.⁴³

Similarly, Louis Berkhof says that an orthodox interpretation of the Scriptures must support the immutability of God's being and will, but without denying God's active involvement in the world. With regards to immutability, Berkhof says that God is free from all accession or diminution or growth or decay in his being and perfections.⁴⁴ But believing also that the Scriptures ascribe mobility or relational change to God, Berkhof queries: "Is He [God] not represented as revealing and hiding Himself, as coming and going, as repenting and changing His intention, and as dealing differently with man before and after conversion?"⁴⁵

I should note briefly a parallel development in the interpretation of the Scriptures regarding God's immutability and mobility in Roman Catholic theology. Although the move among Catholic theologians towards an understanding of immutability that allows

⁴² Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, p. 151.

⁴³ In a similar assertion to Bavinck, Hendrikus Berkhof, his theological progeny declares: "The transcendent God is the God of the covenant adventure. There is no other God behind the God who passes through a history of mankind. He is fully engaged and therefore fully defined in his encounter with us. Otherwise it is not a real encounter. It would be blasphemous to say that this history left God himself unaffected and unmoved." (H. Berkhof, "The (Un) Changing God," in *Grace Upon Grace*, 1975, 27).

⁴⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 58.

⁴⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 59.

mobility to be predicated of God began with Teilhard de Chardin,⁴⁶ Karl Rahner is its most ardent advocate.⁴⁷ Following in Rahner's footsteps are such theologians as Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Hans Küng, E. Schillebeeckx, and P. Schoonenberg. These theologians insist that the incarnation of God in the world both reveals God as really related to humans and as being affected by what happens to humans on earth. Schoonenberg boldly writes: "God's real relations with us imply that also in God change, coming into being, and becoming must be accepted, though in a wholly divine way."⁴⁸

The testimony of these theologians supports my conclusion that some modern theologians exegete the Scriptures as teaching that God is immutable and mobile in his activity in the world. And the main reason that some modern theologians interpret the Scriptures in support of God's mobility is their adoption of the *via positiva* hermeneutical principle. Instead of utilizing the scholastic hermeneutical principle of *via negativa*, these theologians utilize the *via positiva* principle which warrant anthropomorphic or anthropopathic texts to express what is actual in God.

B. Advantage of the *Via Positiva* Principle

Interpreting the Scriptures positively leads, for instance, to the understanding of Exodus 32:10-14 as stating that when God noted Israel's disobedience he proposed to destroy Israel, but because of Moses' intercession God relented from punishing Israel. And the Bible calls this act God's repentance, without hinting that it mars God's immutability. Similarly Jonah 3:10 and Isaiah 38:1-6, which speak of God's repentance, are understood

⁴⁶ See, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, ed., David Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). Also, S. M. Daecke, *Teilhard de Chardin und die Evangelische Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), pp. 387-397.

⁴⁷ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, I (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1954), pp. 125-128 & 196-204.

⁴⁸ See, P. Schoonenberg, *The Christ: A Study of the God-Man Relationship in the Whole of Creation and in Jesus Christ* (New York: Herder and herder, 1971).

positively as expressing God's compassion in forgiving the sins of his people. Indeed, these texts properly reveal God as the judge and savior who condemns the sinner but who also exculpates the sinner.⁴⁹

Still one can point to a biblical reference to God's repentance in a negative sense regarding some of his acts. Typically, the Bible ascribes this negative sense of repentance to God in reference to his regret or remorse over human failure to act according to his will. This is the sense in which Genesis 6:6-7 and 1 Samuel 15:1-35 attribute repentance to God. The Genesis text speaks of God's repentance or regret for creating humans because their sin had threatened to thwart his purpose for creation. And the passage in 1 Samuel attributes repentance to God for anointing Saul king of Israel because Saul's flagrant sins had threatened to thwart God's plan for Israel. In both instances of repentance or regret, God exerts the punishment that he threatens to bring about due to sin. Hence, God's repentance for creating humans led to their destruction in the flood (sparing only Noah's family and couplets of animals). Likewise, God's repentance for making Saul king of Israel led to the dethronement of Saul and the installment of David as king of Israel. Fortunately, these are the only two instances where the Bible speaks of God's repentance in

⁴⁹This explanation differs from the semi-Pelagian or the Arminian claim that God changes his will because God's decisions are contingent on human actions. Barth's dialectical understanding of constancy ensures that God's active participation in human history does not imposition God *en se*. In other words, God remains free both from and in the changes; the changes depend upon him, and not he upon the changes. Neither creation nor justification imposes changes upon God from without. The free involvement of God with the world as its Lord and Redeemer precludes, for Barth, the monistic speculation that the world constitutes an integral part of God's essence (Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, p. 500); and it also precludes the dualistic speculation, where *in abstracto* immutability is ascribed to God and mutability to the creature (Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, p. 501). According to Barth, both of these speculations contradict the reality of God as revealed in the Scriptures. For while monism imports limitations on God whom the Scriptures depict as absolutely free, dualism makes it impossible for God to meaningfully love his creatures. The only reasonable way to avoid these extremes, Barth suggests, is to refocus on the Christ-event as that by which God reveals his truly immutable being as free love: "God is immutably the One whose reality is seen in His condescension in Jesus Christ, in His self-offering and self-concealment, in His self-emptying and self-humiliation" (Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 517).

this negative sense of regret. Whereas the positive sense of repentance, as withdrawal of threatened evil, is attested to in the Scriptures at least thirty times.⁵⁰

On at least thirty instances the Scriptures speak positively of God as acting in a way that shows regret or repentance by, benevolently, withholding his threats against his people. Usually, in such instances of repentance, God corrects human ills (free moral actions) that threaten to thwart his plan of salvation and he exculpates the sinner. Thus, the acts of God, which reveal him as changing his mind or as repenting are indeed acts that express God's benevolence towards humans. If God were not to repent in this manner then surely human beings would have perished in their sins. But because God repents, he again gives human beings another chance to obtain salvation.

Yet the real sublimity of the *via positiva* hermeneutical principle is that it makes us aware and assertive of God's involvement in human perils, joys, and sufferings in the world. Hence we interpret those texts that liken God to an eternal Rock (Deuteronomy 32:4) as both stating God's unchangeable being and God's everlasting love and mercy for his people, which makes him recede from his threats against them. Christian theologians express this conviction in the claim that God is *omnipotent*: he can and does perform any basic act he chooses to perform in the world.

In his immutability of unfailing love, God shows himself as trustworthy through his unwavering, unfailing, and unflickering commitment to save the world. And divine omnipotence entails that God has the power and the freedom to do anything that he wills, even to sacrifice his only Son, for the sake of his people. For this reason Barth insists that the doctrine of divine immutability be coalesced with the doctrine of divine omnipotence.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Jörg Jeremias, *Die Reue Gottes: Aspekte Alttestamentlicher Gottesvorstellung* (Neukirchener-Vluyn, 1975), p. 19f.

⁵¹ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 490f. Barth titles this section "The Constancy and Omnipotence of God," in which he says constancy denote the perfect freedom of God and omnipotence the perfect love in which he is free.

Since nothing, existing or imagined, can cause God to alter his plans or to destroy himself, any change that God does undergo is relative, free, and compatible with his sovereign-aseity.

I find this reading of the Scriptures quite appealing because it does not render God cold, static, or immobile. It even makes for a satisfying reading of the opening words of the Belgic confession which attests that God is the “unique and simple spiritual being, ... Eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, unending, and almighty; the perfect wisdom, righteousness, goodness, the very fountain of *all* good.”⁵² If all events in human history and their transcendent reality are acts of God aimed at driving history towards God’s ultimate goal for humanity, then we should delight in knowing that not only God’s being but also his perfect will for us is immutable. And because God condescends and acts in the world through his Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, there is no better way for us to perceive God than as one who freely moves or walks (to use a more biblical term) with us in our changeable temporal existence.⁵³

Furthermore, the *via positiva* interpretation of the Scriptures eliminates the need for a highly philosophical construct in explicating the doctrine of immutability that tends to subvert God’s mobility. We must strive to fit God’s immutability with his mobility because the Scriptures do not present them as contradictory. Likewise the Scriptures do not conjoin God’s immutability with his mobility, rather these are juxtaposed as real complementary aspects of God, which we must accept by faith. So instead of hatching philosophical or theological theories for emending the Scriptural affirmation to God’s immutability and mobility, theories that often subvert or suppress one aspect over the other, we can accept by faith the Scriptural application of both terms to God. Indeed, we cannot do better than to trust the Scriptural assertion that God is both immutable in his sovereign-aseity and mobile in his operations in the world. Neither is God’s immutability superior to

⁵² *Belgic Confession*, Art. I, 383-384.

⁵³ Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, p. 76.

his mobility in the world, nor does his mobility in the world debase his immutability.

Rather as the creator and sustainer of the world, God extends his love to the world in the eruption of divine transcendence into human history in his definite and actual existence in the world as Jesus Christ.⁵⁴

So, while it is sometimes important for theologians to cohere different aspects of dogma, here it is better that theologians accept by faith the Scriptural equipoise of divine immutability with divine mobility. Accordingly, Leslie Dewart warns:

If the God whom we find always *here* is not to vanish into thin air, if he is not to become an idol, if he is not to be reduced to the totality of being, and if he is not to be explained away as the becoming of the world (as in Hegel and Whitehead) or the projection of man (as in Feuerbach and Marx) -- in a word, if the God who is actually *here* within being is the God of Christian tradition, it follows that he is not to be conceived as *being* (as in Heidegger and Plato).⁵⁵

This biblically balanced presentation of God's immutability and mobility is what compels me to concur with Barth that the orthodox Christian doctrine of divine immutability, as advocated by such theologians as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Calvin, should be understood as stipulating that God is unchangeable and mobile or *relationally* changeable.

IV. Conclusion

Let me conclude by iterating that the Scriptures do indeed state both that God is unchangeable and that God is intimately involved in the world and its changes. This Scriptural affirmation suggests, therefore, that a truly Christian account of God's immutability must strive to balance God's unchangeableness with God's active involvement in the world. So those who see the doctrine of immutability as opposing, for example, the

⁵⁴ Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 257.; Cf. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 181ff. This is the essence of Barth's insistence on the analogia relationis over analogia entis. Barth's confession of God's relationship with humans thus holds to a commensurableness between God and humanity not because they are equal but because of God's grace which unveils God as commensurable to humanity.

⁵⁵ Leslie Dewart, "God and the Supernatural," in *New Theology*, Series # 5, ed. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 155.

fundamental Christian belief that human beings engage God in prayers or that God is somehow moved by prayers are misunderstanding the affirmations of the Scriptures about God. Margaret Paton rightly notes that while philosophers wrestle with the question of whether an immutable God can forgive,⁵⁶ Christians eagerly confess that God has forgiven their sins.⁵⁷ Indeed, from a purely religious point, to question whether God forgives sins is as absurd as asking, “Can birds fly?” or “Can fish swim?” because Christians basically believe that God has forgiven their sins. To ensure that our concept of immutability does not impede against the Scriptural assertion that God acts freely and lovingly in the world for the good of humans, I concur with Barth that we need to soften Aquinas’s view of immutability to fit the Scriptural portrait of God as mobile in the world. We may call this softened version of immutability soft-immutability or constancy.⁵⁸

Soft-immutability or constancy will then permit us to affirm with the Scriptures that although God is unchangeable, as the judge and savior of the world God moves directly in this world of perpetual change. And as a judge is *moved* to grant leniency (“moved” in this case connotes compassion rather than formal causality), so also do the Scriptures

⁵⁶ Anne Minas argues that God cannot forgive because:

(1) To forgive requires one to have potential to be injured or offended and subsequently the capacity to be resentful and remorseful. But since God is not vulnerable; and because God is perfect he could not be resentful or remorseful, but even if God were remorseful and resentful, his immutability would not permit him to alter his feelings towards the offender. (2) Furthermore, forgiveness is connected with remittance. In this sense, forgiveness is a cognitive act or judgment hence, Minas argues, God cannot forgive in the sense of reversing his judgment, for it is logically implausible that an omniscient and immutable being reverses his judgment. (Anne Minas, “God and Forgiveness,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1975): 138-150).

⁵⁷ Margaret Paton, “Can God Forgive?” *Modern Theology* 4 (1988): 225.

⁵⁸ In this way, when one reads in Psalm 110: 4 that, “The Lord has sworn and will not repent, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek,’” this should be understood as the determination of God to establish an everlasting dynasty of David from which he will not withdraw, but not as a general reference to the impossibility of God to repent. Similarly, when Numbers 23:19-20 says: “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor the son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” this too be understood as God’s unrepentance pertaining to his

portray God as moving or acting lovingly towards us in forgiving our sins. In fact, for God to be “unmoved” in this sense is to exemplify profound lack of compassion, care, and concern for those with whom he is related. Fortunately, the insight of the orthodox Christian doctrine of immutability as God’s constancy professes that the living God is unchangeable by nature, yet he moves passionately for the good of those he loves. So God’s immutability neither conflicts with nor negates God’s basic or direct act of sustaining and stabilizing the world. And humans can trust God’s promises and brace their future with assurance that God will not vacillate from his promise to save or sustain them, because God is immutable.

unconditional promise to *bless* Israel, but not as a generalization that God will not ever retract any utterance, even some of his threats against his people.

CHAPTER FIVE

EVALUATIVE CONCLUSION

I. Introduction

In chapter one I examined some of the recent criticism against the traditional Christian doctrine of God's immutability. Since several of these critics isolate Aquinas's view of immutability as representing what orthodox Christians mean by immutability, I committed chapter two to analyzing Aquinas's view of immutability. In chapter three I projected Barth as representing modern orthodox theologians who see problems with cohering Aquinas's claim that God is absolutely immutable with the biblical portrait of God as one who lovingly and freely relates to this perpetually changing world. In chapter four I exegeted several texts of the Scriptures to show that indeed the Scriptures conceive God as one who is unchangeable and yet personally active in this world of changes for the sake of our salvation. In this final chapter of the dissertation, I will propose a defensible sense in which we ought to understand the orthodox Christian doctrine of divine immutability.

But first, I will evaluate the findings of the preceding chapters. Then I will propose the term constancy as appropriately and sufficiently stating what orthodox

Christians means by the doctrine of divine immutability, namely, that God's being, attributes, and will are unchangeable and still God is *self-moving* towards the world.

A. Evaluating the Criticisms against Absolute Immutability

I outlined in chapter one four major criticisms against Aquinas's view of absolute immutability, which for the purpose of our evaluation can be broadly divided into two types. The first argues that Aquinas's view of immutability contradicts other attributes of God, such as omniscience and omnipotence. The second argues that immutability contradicts the Scriptural witness regarding God's relationship with humans in this time-space world. Although I hint at possible solutions for the first criticism, throughout this dissertation I deal specifically with the second criticism. This is because I think that once we clearly state what the Scriptures say about God's unchangeableness it will become evident to all that immutability does not conflict with, but it actually complements, other attributes of God.

Because immutability is a telling attribute of God, I contend that it is imperative for us to correctly state what orthodox Christian theologians mean when they attribute immutability to God. When rightly stated, immutability should foster faith in the Christian God whose love for humans led him to become a man, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and to die on Calvary; rather than raise doubts about God. For this reason I redress Aquinas's view of immutability in light of the Scriptural claim

that God moves in the world by performing such acts as creating, incarnating, and dwelling in human hearts through the Holy Spirit.

After those more general comments, let me now make specific evaluative comments on some of the criticisms stated in chapter one. I must observe at the outset that, although some of these criticisms against Aquinas's view of immutability are cogent, the solutions that are proposed by these critics are not always helpful in eliminating these problems. Often they oscillate from affirming God's absolute immutability to affirming God's absolute changeableness. Here are some examples:

- 1) Moltmann's Argument That Since Jesus Is God and Jesus Was Crucified, God May Be Called the Crucified God.¹

Now, Moltmann understands the biblical assertion that God was crucified as logically contradicting Aquinas's doctrine of absolute immutability. And to solve this problem, Moltmann proposes that we ought not to think of God as immutable because God does allow himself to be changed by others of his own free-will.² Moltmann thinks that God's involvement with creatures to the point of his death on Calvary suggests that God is voluntarily opened to the possibility of being affected by others -- what Moltmann calls -- "the active suffering love of God." And although

¹Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, chs. 2 - 4.

²Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, pp. 229-230.

Nicaea avers that God is unchangeable, Moltmann suggests that Nicaea's statement be understood as nothing but a simile.³

I think that Moltmann errs in supposing that Nicaea's statement is only a simile. Orthodox Christians do not believe that the doctrine of God's immutability is a mere simile. Indeed, the Nicæan Christians believed that the doctrine of immutability states a truth about God's nature. Besides, if God's immutability is a mere simile then Moltmann lacks the justifiable ground for advocating the unchangeableness of God's active love and suffering for the world. For the unchangeableness of God love and grace derive from God's immutable nature. Furthermore, I think that Moltmann's mistake is heightened by his exposition of God's love and suffering with the world as though these acts expunge God's transcendence from the world. But God who is active in and suffers for the world still transcends the world. There is still a vast ontological gap between God and creatures, between our temporality and his eternity: *Finitum est non compax infiniti*.⁴

2) Pannenberg's Charge That the Notion of Immutability Is Foreign to the Scriptures.

Pannenberg criticizes Aquinas for allowing Hellenistic thoughts to adulterate his explanation of the Christian view of God's immutability. Specifically, Pannenberg

³Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 229.

⁴Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 257 & 322; Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, pp. 66-82.

indicts Aquinas (classical theists) for incorporating the term immutability, which is an alien term to the Bible, into Christian theology and for applying the term to God without qualification. While Pannenberg sees the possibility for justifying the application of immutability to God in Rom. 11:29; Heb. 6:17f; 1Sam. 15:29, he nonetheless insists that these texts affirm a different thing about God than the philosophical idea of God as the unmovable mover of the universe. So Pannenberg restricts the concept of immutability to stating only that God is not an originated or a transitory thing.⁵ But again I think that what Pannenberg says here is short of what many orthodox Christians want to assert when they say that God is immutable. By immutability, many orthodox Christians mean to say more than that God is not an originated or a transitory thing; rather they mean to say specifically that God's attributes or essential properties and will are unchangeable.

3) Hartshorne's Criticism of Immutability for Failing to State That God Is in a Process of Becoming.

Hartshorne also criticizes Aquinas's view of absolute immutability because it derives from the Aristotelian idea of God as the unmoved mover of motion in the world. Instead of the unmoved mover, Hartshorne suggests that God is a bipolar being. The bipolarity of God, Hartshorne says, consists of his *primordial* pole, which is stable; and the *consequential* pole, which perpetually changes through concrescence

⁵Pannenberg, *Basic Question in Theology*, pp. 159-165.

of new states of affairs that are actualized in the world. Hartshorne's suggestion is, however, dependent on the ideas of Whitehead's process metaphysics rather than on the Scriptures. Hartshorne's view, therefore, amounts to nothing more than replacing one philosophical system with another. What is more, Hartshorne has no basis for combating Aquinas's view of immutability, because in actuality the God he presents is so ontologically different from the God of Aquinas and classical theism that it is not even worth a comparison.

It is true that process metaphysics incorporates modern scientific findings,⁶ hence it is attractive to some modern theologians who question the classical theistic or Thomistic view of God. But as the philosopher Lee Hardy affirmed -- in a seminar class at Calvin College -- many serious philosophers or scientists find the claims of process metaphysics about God unconvincing because they are not scientifically demonstrable. Further, I think that Thomas Morris's caution against the illusion of thinking that we see more in every way and on every point than those who preceded us were able to see, does rightly apply to Hartshorne.⁷

But unlike process theology, Christian theology does not divide God up into two poles, and assigns motion to one pole of God while the other pole remains stable.

⁶Along with numerous philosophical and Scientific books, Whitehead co-authored with Russell a definite work of the 20th century in mathematics titled: *Principia Mathematica*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

⁷Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, p. 126.

So the solution suggested here by Hartshorne cannot help an orthodox Christian theologian to explain what he or she means by confessing that God is immutable. To explain what immutability means, it seems to me, an orthodox Christian theologian must adopt a different solution from either of the three solutions I have illustrated here that attempt to amend Aquinas's view of immutability. But first let me briefly summarize and evaluate Aquinas's view of immutability before stating the sort of solution that I think will amend Aquinas's view of immutability to fit our modern understanding of the Scriptures witness to God and his relationship with us.

B. Merits of Aquinas's View of Absolute Immutability

I think it is important to note that Aquinas's view of God's absolute immutability still attracts many Christians. And this attraction is for good reason, because Aquinas view of immutability rightly affirms that God's being and existence are unchangeable. So Aquinas's view of immutability has at least these two merits:

1) It Affirms That God Is Ontologically Unchangeable.

Aquinas's view of absolute immutability has the merit of readily affirming that the supreme excellence of God's intrinsic nature is unalterable. I call this "ontological" because its affirmation pertains to the nature and self-subsistent *esse* of God. Aquinas stresses that God is the one and only self-existent and self-subsistent being, whose life encompasses the fullness of perfection, and who neither gains nor loses any of his essential properties (attributes). This is what orthodox Christians intend to establish by stressing the impossibility for God to degenerate or develop.

Either course of change is precluded from God because he is the fullness of life itself. So Aquinas's view of immutability readily affirms that God cannot come into existence or pass away because God's *esse* equals existence. Nor can God's identity be modified because God's being admits no potentiality.

I think that orthodox Christian theologians develop the doctrine of immutability to affirm the fundamental religious conviction that God's existence and identity remain the same at all times. And this is aptly stated in Aquinas's claim that God is *altogether* immutable. Whereas one who says that God changes, say, with respect to his relational properties, must be careful to avoid stipulating that the relational change in properties introduce novelties in the *esse* or character of God, Aquinas rules out the need for any qualification by making immutability absolute.

2) It Affirms That God Has Ethical Immutability.

Aquinas's notion of absolute immutability readily admits the confession that God is unchangeable in his *unconditional* promises and moral obligations to which he has freely pledged himself. I call this "ethical immutability" because it affirms God's faithfulness and reliability. We can place our trust in God's promises and goodness toward us precisely because God is ethically immutable. But ethical immutability is actually secondary and derivative from the supposition that (a) God's nature is unchangeable, (b) God has set an unchangeable moral order, and (c) God freely submits to this moral order by pledging to be the Lord and sustainer of human moral agents. This means that God is ethically immutable because God's being and will are

immutable. So God's promises to creatures, which he commits himself unchangeably, in turn rest on the immutable *esse* and will of God.

But one who holds, for instance, that God's relational properties change in relation to our changes might, however, stumble in stating God's faithfulness to his promises even when we change in relation to God. But Aquinas need not worry about this since his view of absolute immutability readily stipulates that our changes in relation to God do not affect God. Absolute immutability, therefore, assumes that God will act as he has promised, in spite of what humans do, just because God's promises are immutable. Here, let me quickly stipulate the contradistinction between Aquinas's view of ethical immutability and Dorner's view of ethical immutability. For Dorner, God is ethically immutable because God is always loving, holy, and just. That is, God has an ethical nature that is immutable. But for Aquinas, God's ethical immutability depends as well on God's immutable power, or knowledge, or wisdom -- indeed, on all facets of God's nature, even those that are not, strictly speaking, moral.

C. The Demerits of Aquinas's Concept of Absolute Immutability

But notwithstanding these merits, Aquinas's view of absolute immutability has a demerit that must be amended, namely, its conception of God as the absolutely immobile being. Aquinas's assertion that God is absolutely immobile seems not only to deny that God can be moved, but also that God can move himself. Now this claim has a severe negative theological consequence. For example, the denial that God is unmoved by anything whatsoever (not even by human suffering or his love towards

humans) seems to suggest that God is not compassionate. But the Scriptures portray God as the compassionate father who loves his children to the extent of sacrificing his only begotten Son for their redemption.

To correct this negative theological consequence of Aquinas's view of immutability, I join Barth in suggesting that immutability be understood as God's constancy. Barth is not the first person to note that Aquinas's notion of absolute immutability disparages the Scriptural depiction of God. In fact, the Scotists and the Suarezians had already remarked on this issue. But I think that Barth's notion of constancy takes a more gallant step towards aligning God's immutability with God's self-mobility.

In the late thirteenth century John Duns Scotus, a renowned critic of Aquinas, noted that Aquinas's view of absolute immobility renders God austere to the world. Duns Scotus tried to demonstrate the falsity of Aquinas's principle of motion (*omne quod movetur ab alio movetur*) on which he argue that God is absolutely immutable by denouncing the act and potency dichotomy. Duns Scotus rejects Aquinas's claim that God, as the prime mover, who is purely actualized, cannot be moved by anything, even by himself. Duns Scotus suggests that all we can assert on the basis of the Aristotelian principle of motion is that material or physical objects move because

something else puts them in motion, but the conclusion that spiritual objects, such as God, also operate according to this principle of motion is untenable.⁸

According to Duns Scotus, Aquinas made an unjustifiable leap by arguing from the motion of finite things to concluding that God, who is infinite, is the unmoved mover. For, Duns Scotus says, it is logically impossible to reach an uncreated, unmoved mover through inference or deduction from motion. And even though Aquinas reached his conclusion that God is unmovableness *via negativa* deduction from the motions of the world, Duns Scotus argues that, through a negative deduction, Aquinas can only arrive at a mover who is not subject to corporeal motion.⁹ But nothing inheres in the premise that God is not subject to corporeal motion to prevent God from freely moving himself towards the world. So Duns Scotus rejects Aquinas's conclusion that God is absolutely immobile because it fails to follow from its premise. Instead Duns Scotus argues that the Scriptural witness to God's activities of intellect and will in the world suggest that God is self-moving in his thoughts and will regarding temporal entities. And Duns Scotus says that God's self-

⁸Roy R. Effler, *John Duns Scotus and the Principle "Omne Quod Movetur ab Alio Movetur,"* Franciscan Institute Publications Philosophy Series, ed. Allan B. Wolter, no. 15 (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1962), pp. 53-97, commenting on John Duns Scotus, *Quaestiones subtilissimae sive libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, Book IX, question 14.

⁹Ibid.

movement in thought and will is evident in the fact that God is a living and free being.¹⁰

Indeed, Duns Scotus's claim that God is self-moving is not only Scriptural, it is quite Platonic. Plato also argues that the existence of God or gods can be demonstrated by appealing to the motion of the universe. But Plato contends that the world's motions are caused by a soul or mind that is a *self-moving* principle.¹¹ So Alfred Edward Taylor, a famous Plato scholar, identifies the self-moving mover as the diacritical element that separates platonic theologians from Aristotelian theologians.¹² Taylor sees the platonic self-moving mover principle as fundamental in the conceptualization of God by such theologians as St. Augustine and St. Anselm.

But being heavily influenced by Aristotle, Aquinas denies the application of the self-moving principle on God. Following Aristotle, Aquinas argues that every instance of self-motion breaks down into two opposing constituents: a *mover* who

¹⁰John Duns Scotus, *Contingency and Freedom*, Lect. 1:39, intro., trans., and commentary by A. Vos Jaczn, et al. (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Pub., 1994), pp. 43-61.

¹¹Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: 1937), pp. 634-39. An excellent reworking of Plato's argument is found in Alfred E. Taylor's article, "Theism," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed., James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner Press, 1921), pp. 262-264. David John B also presents a brief version of the argument. Hawkins, *The Essentials of Theism* (New York: 1950), pp. 46-49.

¹²Alfred Edward Taylor, *Platonism and Its Influence* (London: George E. Harrap, 1927), pp. 113-114; *Plato: The Man and His Work* (New York: Dial Press, 1936), pp. 491-492.

sets in motion, and the *moved* which is set in motion. Aquinas explains that when we say of an animal that it is self-moving, we are actually referring to its “soul” which sets its “body” in motion. So another moves everything that is in motion, even what appears to exhibit uniform, spontaneous movement such as the celestial spheres.¹³

But St. Thomas, though a famous synthesizer of Platonic and Aristotelian thought, refused to acknowledge and incorporate this Platonic view of the self-mover into his explication of God’s immutability. Instead Aquinas adheres to the Aristotelian principle that “everything which is in motion is moved by another,”¹⁴ although it is apparent that, in a minimal way, rational animals move themselves. Indeed, what needs to be denied, it seems to me, is that God is moved by something extrinsic from himself. Furthermore, I think that Duns Scotus is right in saying that while Aquinas’s principle of motion may cogently apply to material objects that participate in the categories of quantity, quality, and location, there is no apparent logical basis for extending this principle to God, thereby denying that God can move himself. Besides if, as I have shown, the main objective of the doctrine of divine immutability is to affirm God’s unchangeable nature, attributes, and will, then it seems to me there is no theological need for Aquinas to extend the meaning of immutability to include the denial of God’s self-motion. The advantage of Barth’s

¹³Aristotle, *Physics*, VIII, 42.

¹⁴Aquinas, *Commentary on the Physics of Aristotle*, pp. 421-430.

notion of constancy over Aquinas's view of immutability is precisely that it expunges the denial of God's self-movement from the doctrine of immutability.

II. The Advantages of Constancy in Stating What Christians Mean by Immutability

I have argued that Barth's understanding of constancy derives from the Scriptural affirmation of God's intimate relatedness or God's self-movement towards the world in Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures depict God as loving the world (humans) to the extent that he not only sacrificed his begotten Son, Jesus Christ, for the sins of the world but he also infused his Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers to unite them with himself. And the Scriptures affirm God's movements in creating the world and restricting the amount of evil and suffering in the world that bring dolor to God. The Scriptural account of God's acts in this time-space world intimates that God's active love and freedom are the reason for God's self-movement to save the world.

And this Scriptural intimation that God freely moves to redeem us from sin is the central foundation of our religious faith in the Christian God. Many modern Christian theists believe in a God whose immutable being and existence do not hinder him from entering into personal, loving, and compassionate relationship with humans in this world. But in order for God to enter into such personal relationship with humans, God must have some sort of accidental or relational properties. Hence, Eleonore Stump confesses that, "contrary to Aquinas's contention that all of God's properties are essential and simple and identical with God, modern Christian theists

contend that God has non-essential or extrinsically accidental properties which cohere, but are not identical, with God.”¹⁵ And because many modern Christian theists contend that God has accidental or relational properties, they also predicate accidental or relational change to God. So, we deduce from the Scriptural affirmation that God moves himself in creating, in becoming human, and in infusing his Spirit into believers that God is active in the world. And this active involvement of God to the world is affirmed by the modern philosophical tendency to predicate accidental or relational properties of God, thereby permitting us to understand the doctrine of immutability as stating the constancy of God's being in his acts in the world.

The most basic advantage of the notion of constancy, as an explicatory term for immutability, is that it assigns self-mobility or act to God in his free and loving relationship with humans in this changeable world. So constancy intimates that although God is the primary or efficient cause of motion in the world and no material object moves him, still God freely acts in Christ and the Holy Spirit to gain and sustain a rapprochement with human beings.

Furthermore, the notion of God's constancy distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic accidental properties. So we may be justified in asserting both that God is not composed of matter hence God has no intrinsic accidental properties and that some of God's properties are non-essential or extrinsically accidental. This in turn

¹⁵Eleonore Stump, “Simplicity,” *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 250.

allows us to affirm that while God freely changes with respect to his non-essential, relational properties, God is constantly the same God because his essential, non-relational properties, which establish his divinity, do not change. Hence one may say that constancy permits modern orthodox Christian theists to conceive God as intimately related to the world as its creator and sustainer.

As the creator and sustainer of the world, God knows and directs what happens in the world such that he is deeply moved by what happens in the world. Comparing the claims of constancy about God with Aquinas's denial that God is mobile Thomas Gornall says: "Put in human language, Aquinas's claim sounds astonishing, impossible, and even shocking."¹⁶ So another advantage of constancy is that it permits a healthy religious acknowledgement and expression of God's free and loving actions in the world that redound to our salvation.

But unlike P. Van Opperlander, who characterizes Barth's view of constancy as completely opposed to Aquinas's view of immutability,¹⁷ I maintain that Barth accepts much of what Aquinas says about God's immutability, and his notion of constancy removes the obfuscatory claim of Aquinas that God is absolutely immobile. I think that Opperlander's characterization of Barth's notion of constancy

¹⁶Thomas Gornall, *A Philosophy of God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1962), p. 68.

¹⁷P. Den Ottolander, *Deus Immutabilis* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1965), pp. 237-239.

as antithetical to Aquinas's view of immutability is inaccurate because constancy still affirms that God is essentially immutable. The truth, I suggest, is that constancy shares the same theological ethos with immutability but constancy extricates absolute immobility from the Christian God. As it is usually similar people who disagree, and often over the slightest variation of purpose or belief, so also Barth's disagreement with Aquinas's view of immutability is not over the fundamental Christian belief that God's essence, attributes, and will are unchangeable. Rather they disagree over the self-movement of God towards the world. In other words, Barth concurs with Aquinas that God's essence, attributes, or will are unchangeable, but Barth takes the next step, which Aquinas refrains from taking, to state that God is mobile.

A. Assessing Barth's View of Constancy

An important aspect of Barth's view of immutability as constancy is its affirmation that God's essence, because it is pure form or simple substance, does not change; that God cannot lack any of his essential properties or attributes because they define God; and that God's will, because it is the 'mind' of God, cannot be conditioned by what happens on earth. We can deduce from the affirmation of constancy that the orthodox Christian teaching regarding God's immutability is that: God's essence, attributes, and will are unchangeable. And I maintain that, on this point, Barth and Aquinas are in full agreement.

But by affirming that God is mobile Barth avoids the problem which plagues Aquinas's view of absolute immutability, namely, how to attach religious credibility

to the biblical affirmation that God loves humans to the extent that he became man in Christ and died to redeem them from sin. Yet the claim that God is mobile does not imply that God is moving towards an end or *telos*. Rather by assigning mobility to God Barth means to express the self-movement of God in performing salvific acts for us out of love and compassion. God's movement is therefore not locomotive or progressive in the sense that God acquires some essential property not previously had by God. On this Barth agrees with Aquinas that God is the most perfect being who has no potential to be actualized through his motion.¹⁸ So in predicating mobility of God, Barth is not asserting, as process theologians do, that God is moving towards a divine zenith or a state of maturity.

The sublime contribution of Barth to our understanding of the doctrine of God's immutability is therefore his discernment that self-mobility can be properly predicated of God without connoting the errant ideas of locomotion and development. By slightly adjusting our understanding of immutability to accommodate divine mobility, Barth hopes to free us from construing the doctrine of immutability as a pile

¹⁸Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 9. 1. This is how Aquinas sets up the argument for divine immobility:

Because everything which is moved acquires something by its movement, and attains to what it had not attained previously. But since God is infinite, comprehending in Himself all the plenitude of perfection of all being, He cannot acquire anything new, nor extend Himself to anything whereto He was not extended previously. Hence movement in no way belongs to Him.

of philosophical detritus that block our view of the Scriptural portrait of God as a loving father who moves to redeem us from sin.

B. The Merits of Constancy

The conception of God's constancy therefore has the merit of stating the veracious truth of the Scriptures that God is unchangeable and yet God is intimately related to us and to all our perpetual changes. While Duns Scotus and others only criticize Aquinas for deriving absolute immutability from the Aristotelian principle of motion that accounts for the motion of material objects but not God, Barth, through the notion of constancy, reverses absolute immutability and adduces the Scriptural teaching that God is mobile. Barth sees the Scriptures as teaching that God moves in creating the world, in becoming human at the incarnation, and in responding to our prayers.

Indeed, by depicting God as possessing power *to* move others and himself, constancy strengthens our faith in the omnipotence and the *summum bonum* of God. For if God were not to move then it would signify that either God is not able to move himself (act) or he does not want to move himself (act) even for the good of his people. The former option would, however, violate divine omnipotence while the latter would violate the *summum bonum* of God.¹⁹ Constancy unites God's powers

¹⁹Robert Carr-Wiggin, "God's Omnipotence and Immutability," *Thomist* 48 (1984): 44-51; David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 176 & 178.

or ability to hold his being unchangeably with God's goodness to relate to humans and to save them by participating in their spatio-temporally changeable life.

Hence, Barth insists that the theological notion of constancy is derived from Jesus Christ, the revealer of God to humans, from whom we acquire true knowledge about God.²⁰ And contrary to most post-enlightenment thinkers who criticize Aquinas for employing Hellenistic idea of divine inertia to elucidate the Christian doctrine of divine immutability but who also adopt the Hegelian or idealistic ontology of becoming to identify God as essentially mutable,²¹ Barth derives constancy from the Scriptural depiction of God as a *being* who, nevertheless, became man to save us from sin. Barth says that because God is the most perfect being he cannot become perfect or improve on any of his divine attributes by relating to the world. Barth says:

Here 'great' suggests, as is shown by the variant *melius* and by the whole application of the formula, quite generally the large mass of all the qualities of the object described and therefore as much its 'greatness' in relation to time and space as the 'greatness' of its mental attributes or of its power, or of its inner and outward value or ultimately the type of its particular existence.²²

²⁰Karl Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation" in *Against the Stream* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), p. 211.

²¹T.R. Pollard, "The Impassability of God," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (1955): 353-364; K. J. Woolcombe, "The Pain of God," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 20 (1967): 129-148; Kuyper, "The Suffering and Repentance of God," pp. 257-277; W. McWilliams, "Divine Suffering in Contemporary Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980): 35.

²²Anselm, *Proslogium*, II; Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, p. 74.

So Barth denies that the mobility assigned to God by constancy does not connote movement of God in the Hegelian or idealistic sense of movement as becoming what is hitherto in potency. And Barth maintains that God *remains* the same God in, with, and through the movement that he initiates in the world.²³ In other words, God's relatedness to the world does not benefit God *per se* or *en se*. Hence Barth insists that God's active involvement in spatio-temporal changes is a free act. And "there neither is nor can be, nor is to be expected or even thought possible in Him, the One and omnipresent being, any deviation, diminution or addition, nor any degeneration or rejuvenation, any alteration or non-identity or discontinuity."²⁴

Another merit of constancy is that it enhances, rather than deflects, God's sovereign aseity or *es realissimum* because it conceives God's being as infinite, eternal, immutable, and perfect. Constancy allows us to affirm that though God is the most perfect (Anselm) and the purely actualized (Aquinas) being, nevertheless God is directly involved in a loving relationship with the world such that we can say God is mobile. So constancy ameliorates two contrary views: The absolutistic view of immutability, which precludes any and all changes from God, and the immanentistic view, which assigns extreme changes to God corresponding to cosmic historical changes. Constancy moderates the extremities of these views by construing

²³Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 502.

²⁴Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 491.

immutability as stating the unchangeableness of God's being, attributes, and will as well as affirming God's mobility through his direct involvement with us in the world. Thus, constancy rebuts absolute immutability and it rejects the subordination of God to cosmic history. Barth attests that constancy performs this function in this passage:

Over against both these forms of speculation on the eternal difference between the immutable God and mutable world, the affirmation of God's constancy tells us that God is the same both before and after the creation of the world, both without it and along with it. (Yet) He is not far from the world, but near it even and indeed precisely in its mutability. He is bound to it in his immutable essence because this essence is life in itself before there was a life of the world or life in the world, quite apart from the world's life, and as the basis of this life.²⁵

C. Criticisms against Barth's View of God's Mobility

But two main criticisms have been raised against Barth's concept of constancy: the first, pertains to Barth's understanding of the classical theistic usage of the term immobility. The second repels Barth's notion of constancy for its effete statement about God's mobility, which merely iterate what Aquinas had already stated in the phrase *purus actus* without boldly admitting that God's movement towards the world conditions God. Let me briefly analyze these criticisms, beginning with the first.

It is actually an arresting fact that Barth agrees with Aquinas that God is pure actuality, although Barth thinks that Aquinas's statement of immutability is quite extreme in its denial that God is mobile. Barth blames this extremity on Aquinas's

²⁵Barth, *C. D.*, II/1, 502.

reliance on Hellenistic metaphysics. Accordingly, immobility is the fruit of consequences justly drawn from Aquinas's premises. Indeed, when one pertinaciously follows Aristotle's principle of motion, as Aquinas does, and attempts to deduce God's immutability *via negativa* deduction from the motions in the world, one would necessarily conclude that God is absolute immobile. To eliminate this extreme conclusion, Barth limits the application of the Aristotelian principle of motion to God by opting for a positivistic analysis of our religious experience of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit to elucidate the doctrine of divine immutability, which Barth believes affirms the mobility of God.

But Richard Muller charges that "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."²⁶ Specifically, Muller says, Barth has misconstrued the scholastic meaning of God's immobility, which signifies that God cannot be moved by another thing or circumstance because God has no passive potency, by understanding immobile to mean that God cannot move whatsoever. Indeed, Muller argues that the sort of mobility which Barth assigns to God in the notion of constancy closely resembles what Aquinas affirms in his view that God is pure actuality. "For," Muller says, "The scholastics, too, not only the Protestant

²⁶Muller, "Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism," p. 27.

scholastics, but medieval scholastics like Aquinas and Scotus, argue that God is immutable or unmoved in the sense of being eternally *in actus* and never *in potentia*.”²⁷

As I have already indicated, Barth dislikes Aquinas’s claim that God is absolutely immobile because he fears that immobility wrongfully imports the idea of death or inactivity to God. But Muller thinks that Barth needs not fear this because Aquinas had already stated that God is living and active (and as such “mobile” in the sense of Barth) in his loving relationship with human beings. Now let me say, in defense of Barth, that Aquinas did not explicitly state that *purus actus* means that God is self-moving towards the world. Perhaps had Aquinas stated this point explicitly, Barth would not have had any need to modify Aquinas’s view of immutability. Instead Aquinas insists that God cannot even move himself to act in relation to changes occurring in the world.²⁸ Yet many modern thinkers do testify that to be purely actualized is to be active or mobile.

Here, for instance, is what Gottlob Frege says about the notion of actuality and why numbers are not actual entities: “An entity, x, is actual if and only if x either

²⁷Muller, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism,” p. 28.; P.P. Mingos, *Ioannis Duns Scoti Doctrina Philosophica et Theologica* (Quaracchi: Ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1930), II, 94.

²⁸Aquinas, *S. T.*, Ia. 1. 9.

acts or undergoes change or both.”²⁹ If Frege is right, then God must be actual because he acts, that is, God engages in some sort of (say, mental) movement. So in saying that God is pure actuality, Aquinas is stipulating that God acts. But one cannot act without at least mentally moving himself towards the object of his act, so if God acts God is self-moving towards the object of his acts. So how can God be *purus actus* and still absolutely immobile? Now, is it not the case that the pure actuality of God conflicts with Aquinas’s claim that God is absolutely immobile? Barth thinks it does.

And I think that Muller also notices a paradox in these two claims of Aquinas. He tries to resolve it by suggesting that Aquinas’s view of immutability embraces the kind of mobility that Barth is assigning to God. Muller observes that there is a difference between what Aquinas means by immobility and what Barth understands by immobility and he charges Barth with committing a category fallacy, so that Barth’s criticism of Aquinas is unfair.³⁰ Similarly, Michael Dodds contends that while Aquinas rejects the conception of God as a being that can be “moved” or

²⁹Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic: A Logico-Mathematical Enquiry into the Concept of Number*, ed. & trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

³⁰Muller, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism,” p. 27.

brought into being or compelled to act by external forces, Aquinas allows one to predicate self-motion and activity of God.³¹

The second criticism against Barth's notion of constancy states that while Barth uses the word mobility, what Barth means by mobility deviates from the obvious or common meaning of mobility. Such modern theologians as Hendrikus Berkhof and Moltmann reject Barth's notion of mobility because they contend that despite Barth's claim that God moves in the world, Barth essentially iterates Aquinas's transcendent-aseity of God in his denial that God's mobility conditions God. Contrary to Barth, Berkhof maintains that "there is no other God behind the God who passes through a history with mankind. He is fully engaged and therefore fully defined in his encounter with us."³² Commenting further on the difference between Barth and himself on stating the consequence of God's incarnation, Berkhof says:

We differ from Barth in that we do not shrink back from a consequence he apparently does not draw: We believe that not only the covenant process will enrich us, but also God. Without this consequence we still would not take seriously God's partnership in salvation history. If he engages himself wholly in this adventure, that engagement must affect him as well as us."³³

³¹Dodds, "St. Aquinas on the Motion of the Motionless God," p. 239.

³²Berkhof, "The (Un) Changeability of God," p. 27.

³³Berkhof, "The (Un) Changeability of God," p. 28.

One can infer from Berkhof's criticism that Barth's view of divine mobility, particularly his claim that the incarnation establishes that God is mobile, falls short of asserting that God is essentially changeable (or affected in his being) by his movement towards the world.

Like Berkhof, Moltmann also rejects Barth's claim that even in his incarnate state, the Son remained transcendent. Rather Moltmann says that not just the Son but the Father and the Holy Spirit were also immanent in the incarnate state of the Son. So Moltmann declares: "For me the Holy Spirit is first the Spirit of the raising of the dead and then as such the third person of the Trinity."³⁴ Moltmann stresses that God is presently (*adventum*) immanent in human history as the director or pilot of our history towards its eschaton. Only in the *futurum*, when God encompasses all in the new heaven and earth, will God be fully transcendent.³⁵ So like Berkhof,

Moltmann confesses:

Unlike Barth, however, we have no inclination to relate this insight to the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. To think of one "person" or "mode of existence" in God as wholly transcendent and another as wholly descendent is to the detriment of what must concern us most: the complete unity of what we, from our limited viewpoint, consider to be different aspects.³⁶

³⁴Jürgen Moltmann's Letter to Karl Barth, in *Letters*, # 172., trans. & ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 348.

³⁵Moltmann, "Letter to Barth," in *Letters*, #172, p. 349.

³⁶Moltmann, "Letter to Karl Barth," *Letters*, #172.

So we can deduce from these two criticisms of Barth's notion of divine constancy that constancy explains God in quite an acceptable way because it affirms the Scriptural teaching that God is actively involved with us though it refrains from construing this relationship as changing the essential being of God. It is because the notion of constancy delicately balances the unchangeable being of God with God's intimate involvement in our perpetually changeable world that I commend constancy as a fitting concept for explicating what orthodox Christians mean by confessing that God is immutable. But because Barth's notion of mobility is susceptible to misrepresenting Aquinas's view of immobility and to being misunderstood as stating that God's movement is to an end, I propose that we replace mobility with *relational (properties) change*. In the mean time, however, let me show the logical possibility of conceiving God as both immutable and mobile or relationally changeable without contradiction.

III. How Constancy Affirms That God Is Immutable And Mobile

A. How God Is Immutable

So constancy affirms that:

- (i) God is immutable
- (ii) God is mobile or active
- (iii) Therefore, the immutable is mobile or active.

Barth assigns the term self-mobility to God to designate what Aquinas and other orthodox Christians signify by God's *pure actuality*. By mobility then Barth means the "active" involvement of God with the world as the primary cause of its motions. And, like Aquinas, Barth maintains that God himself has no beginning or end; no generation or death. But the term mobility also has a negative nuance of connoting the movement of God from place to place. To avoid this negative nuance I will use the term "active" in place of mobile.

But one may question the veracity of stating that what is active is also immutable. For it appears that a thing that is active is changeable; but Aquinas thought God is pure act, but unchangeable. So how can God be both active and immutable? I will answer this question in light of what Thomas V. Morris calls the three criteria for legitimating the Christian concept of God's immutability. I will use these criteria to show that while this claim seem contradictory it is actually non-contradictory because it adheres to the principle of non-contradiction by assigning immutability and mobility to different aspects of God. Now, according to Morris, for an individual to be immutable it must exemplify the following qualities:

1) God Exemplifies Property Stability

Morris says that an individual has property stability if, and only if, it exemplifies properties, which it has, and it will not cease to have (so Morris calls it "an *enduring* property"), and these properties it cannot have begun to have (so

Morris also calls it “an *immemorial* property”).³⁷ It follows from this definition that a property is stable if, and only if, it is enduring and immemorial. Property stability, therefore, requires more than the mere fact that an individual has the property and will not cease to have it. Rather the individual must have the property *de re*, because it is the individual’s essential and necessary nature. And with respect to the essential properties that God holds, which we dignify by the appellation “divine attributes,” God holds them essentially and necessarily. So there is not a time when God does not fully exemplify his essential properties or attributes and there cannot be a time when God will cease to fully exemplify them. Furthermore, orthodox Christian theists believe that these properties are constitutive of divinity because they cannot stand apart from divinity and necessarily an individual who is divine must exemplify them. Hence, Morris states:

It is unthinkable for theists that, say, Yahweh once began to be God, enjoyed that exalted status for a while, and then subsequently ceased to be God by, in turn, beginning to exemplify the divine attributes, having them for a time and then ceasing to be characterized by them. ... And this is part of what theists in the Judeo-Christian tradition usually are expressing when they reflectively hold as a doctrine of theology that God does not change.³⁸

³⁷Morris also stipulates this third distinction, which I have omitted: “Finally, a property that is both enduring and immemorial will be characterized as immutable.” I do not think that this stipulation specifies any new thing, for what Morris now designates as the criteria for immutable property is the same with what he had called the criteria for stable property.

³⁸Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, p. 85.

So the first part of what Christian theists mean by expressing that God is immutable is that God has essential properties, which he cannot lose or modify. And the second part of what theists mean to express by immutability is this:

2) God Exemplifies Immutable Existence or a *Continuum* of Identity

Morris says that an individual exemplifies immutable existence if, and only if, there is no time when it began to exist (that is, it does not come-to-be), and there is no time when it will cease to exist (that is, pass-away from existence).³⁹ The primary religious concern in this claim is not merely to affirm that God is immortal, but to stoutly deny that God can cease to be who he is (say, the Trinity of divine persons) by becoming another sort of entity. So part of what orthodox Christian theists mean by asserting that God is immutable is that God's identity and existence cannot be altered. God is not only immortal, but he also does not diminish or augment his being. For this reason the Scriptures say that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

3) God Exemplifies *Steadfastness* of Will

This means that God's intentions or plans are not capriciously or whimsically adopted by sudden or hurried decision in response to occurrences in the world. Hence God does not easily change his mind about the good that he proposes for the world in Christ.⁴⁰ I must quickly caution that this criterion does not, however, support the

³⁹Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, p. 85.

⁴⁰Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, p. 88.

conclusion that orthodox Christians hold a strong deterministic view of God's intentions and plans such that God *cannot* (because he is not free to) respond accordingly and freely to human prayers as Richard Swinburne suggests.⁴¹ Rather, I think, it states that God does not randomly change his mind to accommodate every whimsical human act, although God does freely act in response to and in conjunction with human beings. As I indicated in chapter four, it appears that in some of God's warnings, threats, and promises, he does presuppose some conditions by which he will act in congruence with what humans elect to do.

I think it is fairly plausible that God holds a cluster of conditions with respect to some of his threats and promises such that God knows that when a thing (x) obtains in the world, he will freely actualize any of the clusters of conditions (A, B, C, or D). And God knows that when humans actualize (q), he will then bring about X, Y, or Z. And because God foreknows these things, their happening is contingent only for us and not to God because it could have been otherwise. On this view, therefore, one can explain any event in the world as occurring with God's knowledge and God responding to it freely by actualizing any one of his set plans or conditions. Hence, the occurrence of an event need not surprise God or cause him to scramble for ways to cope with it. While it may appear to us that God is changing his mind about his threats, in reality God is not changing his mind about the cluster of conditions he already planned to enact. The free actualization of any given state of affairs by

⁴¹Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 173.

humans would still meet with a divine response that is in the province of God's immutable will, and would not suggest a flip-flop on the part of God. But since we do not know the series of conditions set by God in issuing his threats or promises, perhaps we may be epistemically justified in speaking of God as changing his mind. So the third part of what orthodox Christian theists mean by asserting that God is immutable is that God does not whimsically change his mind regarding his promises to us; rather God faithfully keeps his promises.

But now I must briefly clarify two misconceptions that may result from my claim that God's promises or threats may consist of a series of conditions before I proceed to showing how an immutable God is mobile or active. The first misconception is to suppose that all of God's promises are conditional. Although formal conditional statements, which have the signaling clause "if ... then," are easily identifiable, other counter-factual or indirect conditional statements, which are expressed in propositions that lack formal conditional clues are not so easily identifiable. God's promises or threats are, however, stated in both the direct conditional and the counter-factual statements. An example of a direct conditional statement is God instructing Jeremiah to roam the streets of Jerusalem and *if* he finds but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, *then* he [God] will forgive the city (Jer. 5:1). And an example of an indirect conditional statement is God disclosing his plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham, which Abraham rightly

perceived, even in the absence of “if ... then” clause, that its fulfillment is contingent on the number of the righteous people found in the city.⁴²

The second misconception is that conditionality connotes probability, therefore, the claim that God holds a cluster of conditions imply that God’s plans are probable. Probability suggests likelihood, an uncertainty borne of ignorance, but given that God is omniscient it is impossible that God is uncertain or ignorant about what he wills to do. So, even if God holds a cluster of conditions, he holds them with certitude such that we can say with certainty that God acts from the steadfastness of his will. In other words, God’s will is centered.⁴³

⁴²J. L. Mackie, *Truth, Probability and Paradox: Studies in Philosophical Logic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 64 -73. J. L. Mackie who identifies most dispositional statements as indirect conditions says:

Dispositional statements, such as those which say that someone is irritable or weak-willed or that something is fragile or insecure or has a certain rate of radioactive decay or even a certain mass also seem to entail conditionals, and perhaps involve conditionals in their analysis; and many of the ordinary defining properties of things are dispositional.

⁴³Another theological benefit of identifying some of God’s threats and promises as conditional is that this enabled classical or reformed theists to affirm poignantly that God’s plans are immutable, but without suggesting that they are necessary. For example, while God may have intended (conditionally) the salvation of Sodom and Gomorrah, it is not the case that necessarily God intends the salvation of Sodom and Gomorrah. Hence it was possible that Sodom and Gomorrah could be destroyed. Alvin Plantinga makes this point in his famous “possible worlds” analogy argument that while it is true that God intends his salvation in this world, there are other possible worlds in which he does not exist and so in which God does not intend his salvation. Therefore, the fact that God intends A. Plantinga’s salvation in this world does not mean that necessarily God intends A. Plantinga’s salvation such that in all possible worlds it will be the case that God would save A. Plantinga. Cf. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 44-69.

In sum, therefore, constancy adequately and sufficiently appropriates the three criteria for regarding God as immutable, namely, that God is a being whose *esse* is unchangeable, whose existence cannot be terminated, and whose plans are steadfast. Now, then, let me show how an immutable God is also mobile in his relationship with humans in this world.

B. How God Is Mobile or Active

I have argued in this dissertation that orthodox Christian theists believe that the Scriptures assign self-mobility or pure actuality to God. But what does the self-mobility or pure actuality of God involve? It involves the movement of God towards the world without thwarting the perfection and immutability of God. It is important to note that the Scriptures depict God as self-mobile or as actively involved in our daily lives on earth, and it is by this that the Christian God is contrasted from the impersonal and inert deities of pagan religions who are perpetually *in situ*. But orthodox Christians also maintain that despite God's self-movement towards his creatures in the world, God still remains essentially or substantially immutable. So God's self-mobility is the claim that, while God's *esse*, essential properties or attributes, and will are unchangeable, God is nonetheless intimately related to spatio-temporal beings such that their changes effect relational changes in God. To elucidate God's self-mobility in terms that avert both a farrago of our modern meaning mobility with the scholastic meaning of mobility as Muller indicates and the attribution of

substantive change to God as Berkhof and Moltmann envisage, I propose that we speak instead of “relational property change.”⁴⁴ Also, I think that the notion of relational property change states what is consistent with Aquinas’s claim that God underwent relational change in the incarnation. By relational property change, therefore, I tend to affirm the following:

- 1) Along with His Essential Properties, God Also Holds Non-Essential or Accidental Relational Properties.

But whereas God’s essential properties are unchangeable his non-essential or relational properties are changeable. Note that this claim is, however, open to two criticisms: First, one may argue that a change in God’s relational properties appears to nullify God’s perfection because, as Aquinas argues, God cannot change any of his properties. But such an argument would fail to hold because relational change does not make claims pertaining to God’s essential or constitutive properties, which are unchangeable, but to God accidental or relational properties. Moreover, perfection is not an isolated property, but a communicative property that God transmits to every property that he holds. That is, there is no one particular property that makes God perfect, rather God makes his properties perfect. Since God’s perfection does not depend on one particular property, it is plausible that God’s perfection can be retained even if God changes his relational properties. Indeed, many modern orthodox

⁴⁴Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God*, Contours of Christian Philosophy series, series ed. C. Stephen Evans (Downer Grove: IVP, 1991), pp. 35-39.

Christian theists including such prominent Thomists as Brian Davies are prepared to say that even Aquinas's view of immutability permits the predication of relational change to God. Davies argues:

If it was truly said in AD 20 that God is incarnate because Christ was then alive, and if we grant, as in some sense we must, that fifty years earlier it would have been false to say 'God is incarnate,' ... there is, however, nothing obviously improper in saying that at one time 'God is incarnate' would have been false while at another time it could have been truly affirmed. In its suggestion that a new relationship can be said to hold between God and the world; in its implication that change can be said to occur with respect to God's dealings with man, this conclusion seems acceptable enough.⁴⁵

So a fair consensus among modern orthodox Christians is that God undergoes relational change. And one crosses this fine line from orthodoxy into heterodoxy as soon as one begins to speak of the incarnation as making a difference to the kind of individual (identity) that God is.

2) Meeting Criticisms Against Relational Property Change

Some contemporary theologians are prone to criticizing the concept of relational property change for stating what does not amount to a real change in God. They say, with Peter Geach, that the notion of relational property change is slight or bogus because it does not assign real, but mere, change to God. They argue that because relational change is not predicated of God due to a real change in God, but only in respect of his relation to those objects that have really changed (that is, mere or Cambridge change), God's relational change is hardly worth talking about. Indeed,

⁴⁵Brian Davies, "God, Time and Change," *The Clergy Review* 63 (1978): 72.

even Aquinas underrated relational property change because it fails to state that an intrinsic property of God has changed.

It is important to distinguish between real change, which is the change that applies to a thing's substance or attributes, and mere (or Cambridge) change, which is the change applies to a thing's relational properties because something to which it is related has undergone real change. But I do not think that this distinction alone renders relational property change slight or bogus because it states that God does actually undergo change in his relational properties. The main problem, as I see it, with classifying God's relational property change as slight or "mere" is that it undermines the role of God as the primary or efficient cause of these changes. An example that is often stated of mere relational change is this: Supposing at time t a teacher stands four feet to the left of a student (Sara) and at time tn he moves four feet to the right of Sara. Now, although it is the teacher that actually moves between t and tn , it can be said that Sara underwent mere relational change from being thought of as standing to the right of the teacher at time t to standing to the left of the teacher at time tn . In this case, one may consider the claim that Sara changed slight or mere because actually Sara remained passively stationed in one place throughout t and tn . And one may argue that what is typically sought for in the question of whether God changes is something more tangible than to state that God remains passively stationed but he could be said to have relationally changed because the world actually changed in relation to him. One may then conclude that relational property change makes no

tangible contribution to the discussion of the central issues having to do with the self-mobility of God. But this argument would not hold because, unlike Sara who may not have caused her teacher to move from four feet to her left to four feet to her right between *t* and *tn*, God is the primary cause of the real change in the world which moves in relation to him. Hence, God is not that passive in undergoing relational property change as Sara is.

Indeed Augustine, who also assigns relational property change to God in his active involvement with humans in the world, did not see relational change as slight or bogus.⁴⁶ Rather Augustine says: "Certainly to be the Lord of man happened to God in time. And that all dispute may be taken away, certainly to be your Lord, or mine, who have only lately begun to be, happened to God in time."⁴⁷ Augustine elicits several illustrations to show that God indeed changes relationally in correspondence with our actual changes in the world. In one illustration Augustine argues that one is called a friend relatively because he does not begin to be a friend unless he has begun to love. Hence some relational change of will needs to occur in two individuals for them to call themselves friends. If so, argues Augustine:

How much more easily ought we to admit, concerning that unchangeable substance of God, that something may be so predicated relatively in respect to

⁴⁶Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IV, 2-3. However, Augustine says that God is perfect and that God essence admits of no accident; hence God only is the unchangeable substance or essence.

⁴⁷Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V, 16.

the creature, that although it begin to be so predicated in time, yet nothing shall be understood to have happened to the substance of God itself but only to that creature in respect to which it is predicated? ... Our substance therefore is changed for the better when we become his sons; *and he at the same time begins to be our Father*, but without any change of his own substance. Therefore that which begins to be spoken of God in time, and which was not spoken of Him before, is manifestly spoken of him relatively.⁴⁸

And, like Augustine, Anselm also did not construe God's relational properties change as slight or bogus. Here is an illustration by Anselm that reinforces his argument that God changes relationally with respect to his relationship to us:

For it is certain that I am neither older nor younger than a man who is not yet born, nor equal to him, nor like him. But I shall be able to sustain and to lose all these relations to him, as soon as he shall have been born, according as he shall grow, or undergo change through divers qualities. ... Hence, although the supreme Nature in its simplicity has never undergone such 'accidents' as cause mutation, yet it does not disdain occasional expression in terms of those 'accidents' which are in no wise inconsistent with supreme immutability.⁴⁹

So Augustine and Anselm agree that God changes his relational properties and that this change is not mere, slight, or bogus because God also causes our real change.

But one may further argue that God cannot even change any of his relational properties because God is not a temporal individual. Clearly, the example I have given of mere relational change assumes that Sara undergoes relational change over time; hence to undergo relational change the object must be in time. So it seems that existence in successive moments of time is a necessary condition for undergoing

⁴⁸Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V, 16. (My Italics)

⁴⁹Anselm, *Monologium*, ch. XXV.

relational property change. But since God is eternal, one may argue that God cannot undergo relational property change.⁵⁰

But will this do? The problem with the claim that God is eternal and therefore he cannot change in his relational properties is, as Alvin Plantinga rightly states, that God cannot then be truly said to have entered into successive relations with us. Or God's relational properties would not be distinct from each other and distinct from God's essential properties. So God must have held all his relational properties simultaneously. That is, says Plantinga, already in 100 BC God must have held the property of being worshiped by St. Paul, although St. Paul had not existed in 100 BC; hence he could not have worshiped God in 100 BC. On the other hand, the proposition God was worshiped by St. Paul in AD 40 is true because St. Paul existed and indeed worshiped God in AD 40. Hence in AD 40 God obtained a property that he lacked in 100 BC, namely, the property of being worship by St. Paul.⁵¹

Plantinga explains that we can reasonably suppose that a being undergoes relational property change just in case it possesses at one time a property that at another time it lacks. Now it is true that God *does* undergo change of this sort.⁵² Hence, the property of *being worshiped* by St. Paul (St. Paul's action directed toward

⁵⁰Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, p. 133.

⁵¹Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, pp. 174-175

⁵²Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, p. 175.

God) would be one of God's relational properties along with his property of *loving* St. Paul and his property of *knowing* that St. Paul was converted on the road to Damascus (God's basic acts of loving and knowing the actual St. Paul who existed in AD 40). So the claim that God changes relationally is neither slight nor bogus but refers to the relational property that God acquires by being worshiped by St. Paul and in God's expression of love towards the actual St. Paul who existed in AD 40.

This is how Cornelius Plantinga aptly states the argument against construing God's relational properties change as bogus:

If it is true of Sara at *t* that her teacher stands at her left, and true of Sara at *tn* that her teacher stands at her right, then something about Sara has changed, namely, those relational properties that include her teacher. You may say this change is slight, that it is passive, that it is relational, that it is hardly worth talking about, et cetera. Fine. Maybe the change is so lowly that you want to call it a "change" instead of a change. But surely if a change includes an alteration of properties, however contingent and relational, Sara undergoes change when her teacher moves. And God does too.⁵³

IV. Conclusion

Let me conclude by iterating why I join Barth in contending that the orthodox Christian doctrine of immutability means that God is constant. I think that the analysis of relational property change and the willingness of notable orthodox Christian theologians to predicate relational change of God validate this conclusion.

⁵³Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Correspondence," February 19, 1999

I state, therefore, that by assigning immutability to God orthodox Christians mean two things: First, they mean to say that God's essence, attributes, and will are unchangeable. But, second, they also mean to say that God does change relationally with respect to his intimate and personal relationship with changeable human persons in this time-space world. I maintain, furthermore, that this understanding of immutability is orthodox and consistent with the core message of the Scriptures about God. I acknowledge the delicate nature of the line that separates orthodoxy and heterodoxy on this matter. But I think that it is important for us to balance God's unchangeableness with his relational properties change, for only then can we avoid falling in the heresies of either alienating God from his own creation or rendering God erratic by assigning substantive changes to him. Only by understanding divine immutability as God's constancy can we balance our affirmation of the changelessness of God with what is changeable of God without falling into any ancient heresy or inventing a new one all by ourselves. Through the notion of constancy can we joyfully affirm that in Christ and by the Holy Spirit God has changed our relationship with him and his relationship to us so that we are no longer slaves but his beloved children, friends, indeed co-heirs, as God has become our Father. And through the notion of constancy we can still affirm the unchangeableness of God in his esse, attributes or essential properties, and will.

APPENDIX
THESES
FOR SCHOLASTIC DISPUTATION
ADVANCED BY
TERSUR AKUMA ABEN

DISSERTATION THESES

1. The classical or Thomistic doctrine of divine immutability is not derived solely from the Hellenistic philosophical concept of God. Although Aquinas liberally used Aristotelian logic and philosophical principles in developing and explicating his doctrine of immutability, sufficient textual evidence exists to show that Aquinas understood the Scriptures as teaching that God is immutable. We may say then that the doctrine of divine immutability has a double honor of issuing from philosophical and biblical teachings about God.
2. Aquinas's doctrine of immutability affirms three theses, viz.: God is essentially unchangeable; nothing can move God; and God cannot move himself. The first two theses are uncontentious among orthodox Christian theologians. But the third thesis is contentious.
3. Barth contends that the Christian God, who reveals himself in our space-time world as Jesus Christ of Nazareth, cannot be the immobile God that Aquinas projects. Rather, Barth maintains that God is self-moving in the world, so the claim that God is immutable must be viewed as suggesting only that God is essentially unchangeable and unmovable. Immutability does not mean that God cannot even move himself freely in and toward our space-time world.
4. Barth's claim that God is mobile, however, appears susceptible to being misunderstood as stating the self-movement of God toward his own *telos* or completion or perfection. But God is perfect, so God cannot move towards his own *telos*. I suggest that since the movement of God is for our sake, in relation to us, we should understand God's self-movement as relational. A good way to designate this mobility of God is, I suggest, to say that God changes his relational properties.
5. I believe that Aquinas and Barth would have acceded to the meaning of relational property change and my application of the term to God in explaining immutability. Indeed, Aquinas implicitly affirms this in his concept of God as *purus actus*. And Barth implicitly affirms this in his conception of God as a living person.

COURSEWORK THESES

6. God is outside the realm of our temporality and finitude such that fallen humans cannot have a comprehensive knowledge of God. All our intellectual efforts to know God, if not aided by divine revelation, would result in error. Fortunately, God has revealed himself to us both in nature and in Jesus Christ so that we can now know God. God's revelation, therefore, accords us spiritual sight to perceive God. It has opened our ears to hear God. It has opened our

mouth to discourse with God. And it has conditioned our hearts to believe in God.

7. God the Son became incarnate in our space-time world in approximately 3 BC. Before God the Son was incarnate in our space-time world, one would perhaps be right to have described God as absolutely transcendent. Now, however, after the incarnation we must describe God as immanent and transcendent or as moderately transcendent (contra Hartshorne's claim that God is fully immanent).

8. Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity, strictly speaking, affirms three propositions about God, viz.: God has spatial simplicity, God has temporal simplicity, and God has property simplicity. All three kinds of simplicity are implicit in Aquinas's denial that God is composed of parts or compounded of properties. While the analytical theists, such as Alvin Plantinga, have shown that property simplicity is untenable, even for God, they do not object to spatial and temporal simplicity. Indeed, the doctrines of omnipresence and eternity or everlastingness of God lend much support to the claim that God is temporally and spatially simple.

9. Calvin's denial that Jesus descended into a locational hell during his death does not entail the denial of a locational hell. One cannot deduce from Calvin's claim that hell symbolizes the anguish of Christ on the cross that heaven is only a trope for the joy that one feels in the absence of pain.

10. Abelard's exemplary theory of atonement is quite weak for it fails to give a satisfactory explanation of the blood of Christ. Conversely, the sacrificial view of atonement is quite strong and appealing because it satisfactorily explains why Christ shed blood on the cross of Calvary.

PERSONAL INTEREST THESES

11. The emergence of Reconciliation as theological motif among African Christians is a healthy development. I think that Reconciliation will serve African Christians better than Liberation or Black theology as a theological motif for mitigating the tribal, racial, and religious woes that have besieged Africa in recent years.

12. We can attribute the renascent interest among African Christians in animism and traditional healing practices to the ubiquity of poverty on the continent and the avowal of religious equality.

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