

The Indecisive God by Pastor Marty

I recently began reading a book on the supernatural worldview of the Bible, and it gave me a glimpse into something I had not clearly seen before. I have previously discussed how we sometimes hold an incorrect view of God. One of the most common reasons for this is that the Christian Church has adopted some beliefs about God that actually originated with ancient Greek philosophy—even when many of them directly contradict the clear descriptions of His character and nature as expressed in the Old and New Testaments. It was due to this tendency that Tertullian argued against Gnostic ideas creeping into the Church in the middle of the second century. He was one of the first apologists for the Christian faith and has been recognized as a leader of Western theology. Realizing the danger of Christian Gnosticism, he exclaimed, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? Between heretics and Christians?” Of course, not every concept from Greek philosophy is wrong; John himself describes Jesus as the “The Word” (the Logos), which is a term discussed by Aristotle centuries earlier. However, John and the early Church were careful to define exactly what they did and did not mean. The primary heresy we often associate with Gnosticism is that Jesus could not be a physical expression of God; however, there is another aspect of Gnosticism that still permeates many theological paradigms today: it is the concept that God is “The Unmoved Mover” who is immutable, is not affected by emotions, and does not change His mind.

Gnosticism states that God is unaffected by emotion and never changes His mind.

Now, I expect that some of you have immediately objected to that declaration, remembering the scripture that God “will not

change His mind.” Indeed, three verses that use this exact wording: 1 Samuel 15:29, Psalm 110:4, and Hebrews 7:21. However, we have to be careful how we interpret those verses because the prophet Jeremiah 26:13 says, “Now therefore amend your ways and your deeds and obey the voice of the LORD your God; and the LORD will **change His mind** about the misfortune which He has pronounced against you.” As is often the case, statements about God’s character must be understood in light of the context of the verses as well as the rest of Scripture. In this case, the declarations that God does “not change His mind” has to do with commitments made in relation to His covenant while His willingness to “change His mind” is in response to people changing their ways. Indeed, the entire book of Jonah shows both sides of this issue. On the one hand, God has decided to use Jonah to prophesy against the city of Ninevah, and nothing the rebellious prophet does succeeds in making a difference; on the other hand, God has Jonah prophesy to the people of Ninevah that the city **will be** fully destroyed in 40 days, but He then nullifies that prophecy when the people repent. God clearly explains His willingness to change His mind to a young and sensitive prophet (see Jeremiah 18).

Jeremiah 18:7-10 clearly describes God as being willing to change His mind.

The fact that God is willing to change His mind means that His decisions are not always final. He does not always decide something and then stick with it no matter what. From the earliest recordings in the Bible, there are descriptions of God changing what He planned to do in response to the actions and the intercessions of people, such as Abraham and Moses. Greek philosophy does not consider this could ever be true because they define God as

primarily will, thought, and decision excluding emotion, feeling, and consideration. Ancient Greek philosophers had inseparably entwined foreknowledge and predestination into God's nature because they had elevated the concept and the ideal—their understanding of what perfection actually entailed—over the actual personality and personhood of God. It is true that God sees “the end from the beginning,” but we run into major trouble when we define that as consisting of a single point in the past connecting to a single point in the future by a single straight line. Doing so does more than remove free will from the equation and negate any possibility that prayer actually changes the course of events; it also defines God Himself as being far more autonomous than He actually is.

Removing emotion from God incorrectly defines His character and His nature.

Of course, it is vital to specify exactly what this means. Many would consider it heretical to say that God is not autonomous or independent, and it certainly would be wrong to say that without some type of qualification. Being completely perfect and complete in Himself, God does not need anyone else. To adapt a scripture verse for the purpose, we could say that “God is all-sufficient, and there is no codependence in Him at all.” However, not every relationship is codependent or indicative of some level of need. If that were the case, God would not be in any relationship at all—even with other members of the Trinity. Still, it is necessary to address an errant view of God, which presupposes that He makes all decisions unilaterally. He certainly could do so—just as He could enable us to lose weight on a diet of Krispy Kreme donuts or make everyone who voted differently than us move to another country—but what He “could” do is often not what He will do. (There are many things that we imagine him doing that He simply could not do because they would contradict His character

and His nature, but I am not talking about those types of things). In this case, I'm proposing that God is, to a great extent, disinclined to acting autonomously and independently of others.

God is disinclined to act autonomously and without the involvement of others.

In order to understand this concept, we need to go back to the book of Genesis. In the beginning, we find God speaking the world into existence using the declarative “Let it be so” to cause each event to take place. He simply indicates that light should be, and it exists. In the same way, He created suns and planets, separated the land from the waters, and told the land and sea to bring forth plants and animals. However, a look at the text reveals that the wording for the creation of humans is a bit different. God does not command the earth to bring forth people; instead, He says, “Let us make man in our image” before He Himself makes Adam out of dirt with His own hands. This raises an obvious question: “who is God addressing here?” For the Jewish audience at the time Genesis was written, they would have believed He must be speaking to the heavenly host. As Christians, we regularly assume that this is referring to the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If so, we have to wonder why the Father needed to inform the Son and Spirit what He wanted to do. Also, we should not ignore the fact that most of the times that God declares He is going to do something, He does not use the plural “let us” language; He simply says, “I am now going to do this; will you not be aware of it?” Whether He is speaking to the heavenly host or is describing a collective decision of the Godhead, there is still the bigger question that needs to be addressed: why does He have any need (or desire) to propose what He is going to do before He actually does it?

He sometimes seems to propose what He intends to do before He actually does it.

If this was the only instance of God proposing His intention beforehand, we might consider this a literary device. (We can't really consider it to be a prophetic announcement according to Amos 3:7 because there were no prophets when it took place). However, this is not an isolated situation. A very interesting conversation takes place in Genesis 18 between God and Abraham. Immediately after stating that Abraham would have a child within the year—and Sarah laughing at His word—God and the two angels begin walking toward Sodom. We know they were angels, for the next chapter bears it out. God then asks, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" It is important to note that He was not asking Abraham a question here. He did not say, "Shall I hide from you" in the verse and then wait for an answer. As the remainder of the quotation indicates, this was actually a rhetorical question posed to the angels, who appropriately offer no objection. (It seems a bit weird if we assume He is talking to Himself here—and there isn't any "Shall we" to suggest the Godhead). God then states His intention to go down to see if things in Sodom are as bad as He's heard on the news. He does not say He is going to nuke the place, but Abraham understands His meaning loud and clear enough to intercede for the city. In the following conversation, God compromises from 50 down to 10 righteous people. If we resist the temptation to read between the lines and simply take the passage for what it says, it indicates that God is open to suggestion. (Note: this apparently does not work when it comes to the lottery). Abraham clearly knew something profound about God: there are times when He is totally willing to negotiate on His plans.

There are times when God seems to be totally open to negotiation on His plans.

On more than one occasion, God shows in the Old Testament that He calls and appoints prophets specifically to mediate on behalf of a

people so He can be more lenient toward them; He wants to have people like Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Amos, and Daniel—people who will mediate. However, this is not limited to mediation. We find a very interesting account in 2 Chronicles where Micaiah describes an event that took place in Heaven. It is significant, so I am providing the whole passage here:

Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the multitudes of heaven standing on his right and on his left. And the LORD said, "Who will entice Ahab king of Israel into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?" One suggested this, and another that. Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, "I will entice him." "By what means?" the LORD asked. "I will go and be a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all his prophets," he said. "You will succeed in enticing him," said the LORD. "Go and do it." So now the LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouths of these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you.

If we read the verse for what it says, we see the Great I AM THAT I AM asking for suggestions! Clearly, He already intended the outcome—Ahab falling in battle. Due to the continued evil of this king and his wife Jezebel, opportunities to repent had run out; however, although God had decided the outcome, He was not set as to how it would occur. Also, this conversation was not between God and a prophet; it is between God and the heavenly hosts. Even in discussion with the heavenly beings, God asks for options.

God occasionally seems to desire options in the way He carries out His plans.

This is mind-blowing if we think about it in relation to many common perceptions about the way God acts. We often tend to hear Him described as a sovereign on a throne, making decrees that are to be carried out by everyone below Him. However, that is not what we see in

these instances. We might describe the main difference between a boss and a leader is that one requires while the other inspires. In my own experience as a department manager, I would indicate what needed to be done and then open the floor to hear ideas, options, and suggestions before making a final decision. Of course, there were times when it wasn't always popular, but more often than not, it would encourage cooperation and investment. In a very similar way, God desires us to cooperate with Him in relationship. A perfect example of this is seen in the two instances when Jesus fed the crowds. In the first instance, the disciples ask Jesus to send the crowds away to buy food. Jesus counters their suggestion with His own: "You feed them!" The disciples only have a kid's lunch, a Happy Meal. Jesus blesses it and feeds a crowd of more than 5000. Shortly after this, there is another similar situation with a slightly smaller crowd. This time, Jesus already knows what He wants to do, but He doesn't tell the disciples the plan right away. Instead, He says to them, "The people haven't eaten, and if we send them away to buy their own food, they might pass out from hunger and not make it." His wording is clearly intended to remind them of the prior instance. You can almost feel Him prompting them, hoping they will say, "Let's multiply the food again! I have two Tacos and a Chalupa . . ." Although He knew what He was intending to do, he wanted them to suggest it.

Jesus knew what He was going to do but wanted His disciples to suggest it.

When I was in college, I remember my discovery that there were many Christians who did not believe that God actually did miracles in our day and age—unless they were significant enough to change the course of world events. I found myself in the uncomfortable situation of having Him tell me to say and do things that were often unacceptable to others—as well as requiring a great deal of faith on my part. I did

not like the idea of failure or rejection. After a particularly rough day, I was very conflicted: on the one hand, I was glad God wanted to use me, but on the other hand, I was grieved at the Cessationist theology I saw around me as well as the flak I got from other students. I went to the chapel and decided to make God an offer. "God, I will go wherever You tell me to go, say whatever You tell me to say, and do whatever You tell me to do . . . but if I do, then You have to back me up every time." I was completely unprepared for the almost instantaneous "It's a deal!" I heard from Him. I quickly found myself trying to back-pedal—knowing that any time He responded that quickly meant big trouble—but He made it very clear there were no loop holes. I am glad, for it inaugurated a period of time in my life in which every single prayer—when they were prayed out loud and made very specific in scope—was answered almost immediately. In a manner reminiscent of Samuel, He did not let a single word fall from my lips without honoring it—even when I found myself telling someone when to look for a shooting star! Of course, I knew that my part of the deal included doing all I could to be sensitive to His Spirit's leading and obedient to whatever He told me to do; still, it confirmed to me that God seeks people to be in partnership with Him; He doesn't want slaves.

God is looking for those who will be in a partnership-type relationship with Him.

More than anything else, the main point of this newsletter is to express how significant prayer can be. Many of us view prayer as a time of stating our needs and then waiting to see which ones God approves—almost like we are submitting work orders or buying raffle tickets. However, prayer is much more than that. It is a dialogue with a God who is open to suggestion, willing to negotiate, and even inclined to accept an occasional deal—as long as it isn't contrary to His Word. The only way we are ever going to know the limit is if we actually give it a try.