

THEOLOGY

*Classical Theism
Makes a Comeback*

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In recent years, there has been a change in the way theologians talk about the doctrine of God. One way to describe the change would be to say that classical theism has made a comeback.

By “classical theism,” I mean a bundle of related doctrines about the Christian God: aseity, immutability, impassibility, and simplicity. Taken together, doctrines like these offer a view of God that is austere and exalted. The God described in these ancient terms is a God who does not need anything outside of himself; does not change; does not suffer; and is not composed of parts. Asked to conceive of such a being, the theological mind feels itself scrambling and stretching. “If you understand it,” said Augustine, “then it is not God.”

This view is an ancient one, and it did not go by the name “classical theism” until a few decades ago. Sometime after the middle of the twentieth century, a number of related movements in academic theology began to call into question the God of classical theism. Some of the objections were philosophical, and it seems to be philosophers who coined the phrase “classical theism.” But especially among evangelicals, most of the objections had another source. It seemed hard to reconcile this austere and metaphysically severe God with the biblical story. **How can God be ontologically above distinctions, change, and suffering, when the Bible is the story of a God who has many distinct attributes, who becomes human and dies on the cross?** Under questions like these, seminary education for decades was bedeviled by a variety of revisionist accounts of the doctrine of God.

There was a wide range of alternatives (we are describing a broad trend here, not a particular school of thought), but a generation or two of scholars learned to chalk up a big question mark beside the old ideas that God was not composed of body, parts, or passions.

In recent work, though, there has been a glad embrace of these classic doctrines of divine simplicity, aseity, impassibility, and immutability. First came a few books that confronted the question in their titles: *Does God Change?* and *Does God Suffer?* (both by Thomas Weinandy; St Bede’s, 1985, and T&T Clark, 2000, respectively). A steady stream of book chapters and journal articles began mounting defenses of what had seemed for some time indefensible.

Then came the masterful synthesis of recent trends by Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), which engaged directly in dialogue with the various revisionist, non-classical theisms of recent decades. Vanhoozer’s book is demanding, but serves well as a report of what the most important recent work on the doctrine of God has said, and also as a constructive doctrinal account on its own.

For those who find Vanhoozer’s comprehensive volume too demanding for their immediate needs, a couple of recent books may provide easier access. James Dolezal’s *All That Is In God* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2017) picks out just one aspect of the classical doctrine of God (divine simplicity) and defends it carefully on all sides. *God Is* (Crossway, 2017), by Mark Jones, presents the classical divine attributes in a more devotional mode, connected to Christian spiritual experience and to biblical preaching. Finally, Stephen Wellum’s book on Christology, *God the Son Incarnate* (Crossway, 2016), patiently works through the teaching on the incarnation from a starting point in a traditionally austere and classical doctrine of God.

The payoff in all of this recent recapturing of the glories of classical theism is, perhaps paradoxically, a warm and deeply engaged understanding of God’s care for and commitment to human salvation. The God of classical theism, as this current trend toward retrieving the classical doctrine of God would have it, is the God of Jesus Christ and the God of salvation. **D**



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