

THE IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

“the infinite personal Lord of all”

Key question

Is God near or far from us?

Key text

Acts 17:24-31

“²⁴The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; ²⁶and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined {their} appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His offspring. ²⁹Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, ³¹because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”

Key Definitions

Immanence

God is everywhere present. God manifests himself in history and in the lives of people in both mundane and dramatic ways.

Transcendence

God is wholly other in the sense that he is unlike his creation. God stands above and beyond the fallen created order as one who is perfectly holy.

Introduction

1. When someone stands up in a church service and tells the congregation that God spoke to them about dropping out of school and going to the mission field, how do you respond? Does God speak to people today through subjective revelation? If so, how? Has God ever spoken to you in such a way?
2. How would you respond to this situation? A young woman from a congregation across town visits your church and after the service she says, “I did not sense the Lord’s presence in your worship.” When you ask her, “Why?” she responds, “People did not seem to be in the presence of God, their body language told me that they were not really swept into the Spirit’s

moving. They did not raise their hands, or close their eyes, or worship with feeling.” What is she talking about? How should you interact with her? Is she responding from a valid Biblical perspective or is she just expressing a style preference?

3. What is your sense of the gifts of prophecy, word or knowledge, etc. as they are expressed in some churches? Does God really speak in this way today? How can you know if God is speaking through a prophetic message?
4. A man loses his job and tells you that “God must have something better for me.” Is he on sound Biblical grounds for having such an attitude? How would you encourage him? What does the Bible say about such a hope?

A. **We must be mindful of how God relates to the created world.**

1. Is God present and active within the universe - immanent?
 - a. Immanence texts:
 1. Cultural Immanence can refer to the presence of God in the normal fabric of life.
 - **Jer.23:24** “Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? says the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord.”
 - **Acts 17:27-28** “Yet he is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being; as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”
 - **Psalms 104:29-30** “When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; when thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground.”
 2. Charismatic Immanence can also refer to the supernatural manifestation of God in the fabric of life.
 - **I Pet.4:11** “Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God;”
 - **I Cor.14:1** “Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.”
 - The book of Acts contains many examples of God’s Spirit speaking to (leading) His people. 9:4-6,10-16; 10:9-16;13:2
 3. The incarnation is the most dramatic example of God’s immanence.
 - **Jn.1:14** “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father full of grace and truth.”
 - **Phil.2:6** “who, although He existed in the form of God. Did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.”
 - **Col.1:17** “And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation.”.
 - b. The more cultural immanence is emphasized, the more the view moves towards pantheism (everything is god) as contrasted with theism (God is a distinct being).
 - c. Classic liberalism tends to emphasize immanence at the expense of transcendence.
 1. Friedrich Schleiermacher (a classic liberal) said, “Miracles = the religious name for events.”
 2. The virgin birth is said to be a miracle in the sense that every birth is a miracle.
 3. Revelation is reduced to insight. Political - social evolution is seen as God’s hand at work in history.

4. W. Robertson Smith when tried for heresy on the charge that he denied the divinity of Jesus replied, "How can they accuse me of that? I've never denied the divinity of any man, let alone Jesus!"
 - d. Paul Tillich saw God as the essence or ground of being itself (not an individual being alongside other distinct beings).
 - e. In "The Death of God" theology it is understood that God moved from transcendence to radical immanence culminating in the person of Jesus. When Jesus died, the transcendence of God ended.
 - f. The creation account in Gen.1-2 is written, in part, to refute any notion of radical immanence.
2. Is God absent and removed from the universe - transcendent?
- a. Transcendence texts
 - **Isa.55:8-9** "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."
 - **Isa.6:1-5** The Lord is "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up."
 - **Psalm 113:5-6** "Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth?"
 - **John 8:23** "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world."
 - b. The traditional notion that God was spatially separated from creation ("up there" or "out there") no longer seems appropriate. It is more accurate to think of Him as "other than" or in a different dimension.
 - c. Karl Barth reacting to liberalism's immanent God emphasized the fact that He was "altogether other" separated from man by an infinite qualitative distinction.
 - d. Soren Kierkegaard emphasized the dimensional beyondness of God. Just as sound is different than sight so God is different from man.

Immanence

Transcendence

Pantheism (Hinduism) (God = nature)	Classic Liberalism (God works through nature only)	Panentheism (Tillich) (God = ground of being)	Death of God (God became immanent)		Non spatial model (Kierkegaard) (God = new dimension)	Traditional model (three story universe)	Neo Orthodoxy (Barth) (God = wholly other)	Deism (God is a watch maker)
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B. Avoid the mistake of radical immanence in your perception of God.

1. Evil and the demonic can not be accounted for if God is in everything.
2. Ethical evaluation of events is impossible if God is behind all that exists.
3. God loses his personal dimension if He is not distinct from creation.

C. Understand the practical implications of immanence.

1. God can work through natural means to accomplish his purposes - i.e. medicine.
2. God may use persons and organizations that are not avowedly Christian - i.e. Assyria, Pilot.
3. We should appreciate all that God has created - i.e. the image of God is in all people.
4. We can learn something about God from his creation.
5. There is a common ground for sharing the gospel with those who do not believe.

D. Avoid the problem of radical transcendence in your view of God.

1. No one can know or relate to God in a personal way if he is wholly other.
2. God does not have control of the universe if He is not in contact with it.
3. God appears unapproachable and disinterested if He is not involved.
4. Prayer is meaningless if God has no contact with life.

E. Understand the implications of transcendence.

1. There is something higher than man.
2. God can never be completely captured in human concepts.
3. Our salvation is not our achievement.
4. There will always be a difference between God and man.
5. Reverence is appropriate in our relationship with God.
6. We should look for genuinely transcendent working by God.

F. Be familiar with the following texts of special interest.

1. **Romans 8:28** “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”
 - God’s working all things for good may include suffering and death (vs.38).
 - It is not always possible for us to understand how circumstances can work for good (Job).
 - We know that God can use evil for good (Acts 2:23).
 - It is important to note that it is all things working “together” that God promises to be good. There may be a lot of individual circumstances that are not good.
2. **Acts 13:2** “And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”
 - The Holy Spirit had already called Barnabas and Saul before the elders got the message.
 - The voice of God’s Spirit must have been clear enough through the elder’s “ministering to the Lord and fasting” that they could with confidence say that God had spoken to them.
 - This is not the only way that God made his will known. In Acts 15:7 there was “much debate” and in vs.22 “it seemed good to the apostles and the elders.”
3. **I Corinthians 12:7** “But to each one is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”
 - Every Christian has the ability to be a channel of God’s immanence in ministry.
 - Not everyone will have the same expression of God’s Spirit.
 - There is a tendency to use spiritual gifts in a judgmental way (vs.12-31)
4. **Matthew 4:1-11** Satan tempts Jesus to take charge of his life and career and not wait for God to work or direct.
 - God's interest and immanence in our lives is not always evident.
 - Christian faith is often a call to trust God by waiting on God to move or direct us.
 - Satan's plan is to challenge God's plan for life and history.

The Point

One of the great mysteries of God is the fact that He can be so different than anything we know and yet relate to us as a person.

Response

Head

I am to understand that:

God is to be understood as both personal and near to us yet radically distinct from us.

Heart

I am to believe that:

I can relate to God on a personal level and yet not confine Him to any temporal model that I know.

Hands

I am to behave by:

Praying and expecting God to be directly involved in the details of this life but not always.

The Doctrine of God By Blair Reynolds

Classical theism, the reigning doctrine of God in Christendom, affirms that God is void of body, parts, passions, even compassion, wholly simple, wholly immutable, independent, immaterial, the supreme cause and never the effect. What creatures have, God does not. I challenge this doctrine, on five grounds.

First, I find it unbiblical. Now, in so saying, I realize the Bible is not a book on metaphysics. God's salvific revelation occurs in history, not nature. Nevertheless, I feel Scripture implies a metaphysic wholly other than that found in classical theism. Granted, many biblical passages speak of God as immutable. But wait a second; many others do in fact speak of God as changing (e.g., Hosea 11:8, Amos 7:3, Jeremiah 18:8, Exodus 32:14). Indeed, the prophets function so as to alter the operations of YHWH's will. Malachi 3:5-7 is often taken to be an affirmation of a wholly immutable God ("I, the Lord, change not"). But this is followed up by saying, "Return to me, that I might return to you." Taken together, these passages mean, at least to me, that God enjoys a fixity of purpose, and in that fixity, does not vary. But rather than denying change, such fixity insists upon it. Hence, if we change in such-and-such a way, then God, too, will change in an appropriate manner. And the biblical metaphors for God are all anthropomorphic in nature. God shares the creaturely characteristics of will, memory, emotion, anger, disappointment, etc. Quarrel all you want with these metaphors, as but a mere concession to our feeble intellects. Still, the fact remains they mean God undergoes changing affective states analogous to pleasure and displeasure in ourselves. If these metaphors do not fit the reality of God, then they are useless and should be dropped. The Incarnation, if it is at all revelatory of God, reveals his general modus operandi with creation. God is

incarnate throughout the entire universe, which functions as his body. And the biblical predication of God is generally relative predication. It's hard to be a creator, without a creation; a king, without subjects; a father, without children; a lover, without someone to love.

Second, there is the matter of epistemology. Knowledge, I think, demands two things. No. 1, we must generalize from the familiar to the unfamiliar. No. 2, to have knowledge, real knowledge, we must have empathy, a knowing from "within." Now, if there is one "within" I am most familiar with, it is human experience. So, I think that unless there is a genuine analogy, a true likeness, between ourselves and all the rest of reality, from the atom up to God, then we haven't got an inkling as to what is going on. Now, one major characteristic of human existence is that we are continually changing, evolving. The traditional notion of the "self" as something permanent is a myth. Rather, the "self" is best thought of as a name for a society of perishing occasions. Moment to moment, we are different persons. No thinker thinks twice. God, then, I see as the most changeable that there is, the supreme effect as well as cause. And in so saying, I am not overlooking the fact that there is consistency in God. There is an absolute or abstract dimension to God. It is what God always does. God always seeks to maximize beauty, is always omniscient, empathic, loving. But there is also the matter of the relative nature of God, God in the concrete, God as continually changing. We must, however, be careful not to focus just on the common thread running through various occasions, overlooking their key differences. Well may God always seek to maximize beauty; but what is beautiful in one context or era may not be in another. Well may God always be omniscient; but as new things happen, God's knowledge is increased, if for no other reason than that he has moved from knowing X as merely potential to knowing X as a definite, decided matter of fact. Another major characteristic of human existence is that we are social, relational beings who arise out of our relationships. Reality is like a spider's web; you tweak it here and it jiggles there. God, then, is indeed the supreme effect as well as cause. As much as God creates the universe, the universe creates God.

Third, there is the matter of meaning, value, significance. If God is wholly immutable, as classical theism argues, then, saint or sinner, it's all the same to him, he remains blissfully indifferent. If nothing can make any real difference in God, then his love and wisdom can make no difference in his decision-making process. But who can put any real faith in such a cold, dehumanizing God? And if God could be just as happy, whole, and complete, without a universe as with one, then why did he bother to create it in the first place? How would we be anything other than meaningless and insignificant to him? And how could we think of God as loving? Love means, at a minimum, to derive part of the content of your being from the loved object. And how could God deliver us from the evil of evils, that the past fades? We acquire satisfactions, only to lose them. So, why bother to do anything, when it's all going to go up in smoke soon enough? If God is wholly immutable, he is, then, helpless to deliver us from this evil. On the other hand, if God is supreme effect, if we can pass our experiences over into God, then everything is of significance, because everything is preserved and enjoyed in God's memory forever.

Fourth, there is the matter of divine transcendence. Classical theism sought to affirm transcendence, but at the price of immanence. God, in Thomism, exists wholly outside of creation, wholly unrelated to anything going on. Hence, we are left with the tragic situation of a world that never really gets into the life of God, because he is not about to react to it, and a God who never really gets into the world, because he would then be affected, conditioned, by it. The universe, then, has meaning only in the negative sense of a kind of holding tank to be escaped from if we are to attain to what is of ultimate value. Thus Christianity becomes a static, world-negating religion. And then, is God truly transcendent? The classical model of God pictures him and the world as two wholly separate circles that do not intersect. The world of time, change, materiality, contrasted over

and against the divine world of immaterial, changeless simplicity. Well then, what do we call the whole of reality, the whole shooting match? Meta-God? Because by that it would seem that God is but one limited aspect of some larger, more inclusive whole or reality that includes him and then some. Put another way, classical theism argued that no reality can stand over and against God, on an equal footing, so as to exclude him. But, ironically, that is exactly what classical theism ended up doing: The whole world of materiality and change is, at best, an anti-God principle, the complete and total antithesis of God's own nature. I think a better solution is to say that God is the chief exemplification of all metaphysical principles. Loosely put, what holds for creatures also holds for God, but to the nth degree. And this huge quantitative difference makes for a qualitative one as well. Everything in the universe is a part of everything else, is incarnate throughout; but only to a very limited degree. We, for example, directly interact with little more than our own brain cells. In sharp contrast, God's body, the universe, is wholly internal to him. Hence, God enjoys an unsurpassably direct and immediate empathic response to any and all creaturely feeling. We are total strangers to sensitivity on such a grand scale.

Fifth, and finally, there is the matter of what is sometimes called the "monopolar prejudice" of classical theism. Now, it sure seems to me that the church fathers, and many Christians today, set up checklists of seemingly contradictory divine attributes, such as being-becoming, and cause-effect. Then they go down the list, ascribing only one side to God, the side that squares best with certain Hellenic notions that the "really real" is wholly simple, immaterial, and passionless. To me, this is lopsided. Nothing real can be described by reference to only one side or pole, and each pole represents a virtue. If it is good to be independent and not deterred by others, it is also good to be deeply moved and affected by the feelings of others. I think that creation is God's own eternal evolution from unconsciousness into self-consciousness and self-actualization. We should rejoice in the fact that we have a genuine significance in the life of God.

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Pastoral advice

How can one avoid making mistakes in understanding God in this area?

1. As with so many issues in theology, there is a need to keep a balance that includes a careful reading of all the texts that bear on a subject.
2. One's personality or circumstance in life may set them up to be vulnerable to one excess or the other. Know your areas of vulnerability.
3. I sense that Kierkegaard's observations come closest to the balance that the Biblical material warrants.

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. **Specific facts you should know.**
 - a. What do we mean by immanence and transcendence?
 - b. What is the Biblical evidence of immanence and transcendence?

2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.

- a. What are the dangers of immanence without transcendence?
- b. What are the dangers of transcendence without immanence?

3. Questions you should wrestle with.

- a. How is God related to His creation as a sustaining presence?