

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 5: What does it mean that he is transcendent and immanent?

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“Help! Help!” The shrill cries of panic pierced my attention’s focus on what I was doing and drew me into our family room where I viewed a segment of a Saturday morning cartoon that one of the younger members of our family was watching. A canoe with people in it was being swept unalterably toward a cataract where they would perish if nothing were done. Seeing their plight, a man on the river’s bank began chopping down a tree that would stop the canoe, when somebody yelled at him, “You can’t do that! That tree is a living being!!”

The explanation that ensued reflects a major precept of the popular New Age religion and is based on an ancient philosophy, monism, the belief that all reality is of one substance. Its religious expression, pantheism, is the notion that God is in everything. This concept is a major tenet in Eastern religions, and we hear it with increasing frequency from the growing number of people who are adherents or admirers of Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Asian religions. This concept of God is very different from what the Bible teaches, and it has significant implications for our lives. Here is one example of what occurs when people are unaware of or ignore God’s revelation of himself as recorded in the Old and New Testaments. There in God’s Word we see that he transcends all things yet is close by but not of the same substance or identified with them.

God is transcendent.

In his transcendence we see him above and beyond all phenomena. He is sovereign, governing all that exists, and the Ruler of the universe. To the people of Judah, who disobediently allowed themselves to be influenced by their pagan neighbors, who believed only in local gods, Jeremiah was called by the LORD God to reveal himself as far more than a domestic deity. “‘Am I only a God nearby,’ declares the LORD, ‘and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 23:23-24) “The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens. Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?” (Psalm 113:4-6)

Think about that description of God’s transcendence: he “stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth,” meaning that he also exists beyond the stars. We can grasp a glimpse of how far away that is with the help of some science and math. The nearest star other than the sun is Alpha Centauri, which is a “mere” four light years away. A light year, remember, is the distance light travels in a vacuum in a year. So at 186,282 miles per second, light travels almost 5.9 trillion miles in one year. Alpha Centauri is four times that or roughly 24 trillion miles away. To help comprehend those massive data,

picture a line with the earth at the left end. If the sun is 1 ¼ *inches* to the right of the earth, Alpha Centauri would be seven *miles* beyond the sun on your line!

Studies in astronomy and astrophysics yield information to help us understand more and appreciate the transcendent dimension of God's being. Our Milky Way galaxy has a diameter of 100,000 light years, which means that it takes light 100,000 years to travel just across *our* galaxy. Some galaxies are 10 *billion light years* away from us. If one of those galaxies had exploded 5 billion years ago, we wouldn't be able to detect the explosion for another 5 billion years! And God transcends them all!

Before his ascension to heaven, Jesus told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matthew 28:18) The apostle Paul further explained what that authority means:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1:17-23)

Paul further explains about Christ that

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

We see here that God created the whole world in and through Christ; thus all creation belongs to Christ. (v. 16) This reality was graphically described by a still oft-quoted statement of one of Europe's greatest Christian theologians, Abraham Kuyper, who also served as premier of The Netherlands from 1901-1905: "There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'" As Chris Wright, pastor,

author, and International Ministries Director of the Langham Partnership, says, “We are walking on Jesus’ property.”¹

We also read, “To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.” (Deuteronomy 10:14) The very word translated God in the Hebrew means God of gods, mighty and powerful. To comfort and guide his people during the Exile he inspired Isaiah one hundred fifty years earlier to write,

...it will be said: “Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.” For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, [God’s transcendence] but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. [God’s immanence] (Isaiah 57:14-15)

God is immanent.

In his immanence we see him in a loving and caring relationship *with* his people. “He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.” (Psalm 113:7-8; See also Deuteronomy 10:12-22.) Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper² who will be with you forever. That helper is the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it doesn't see or know him. You know him, because he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:15-17 GW)

Since God is immanent, we can be certain that he is constantly with us, even in difficult circumstances. For example, we read in Psalm 46:1 that “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” Think about what that means! You never have to wonder where God is when challenging times occur. He is right there with you. Ask him to help you, and then be confident that he not only will but that he already is!

I see countless evidences of his loving hand in my life every day, including his help in my grieving the death of my precious wife of 48 ½ years, Carol. She was the most wonderful wife I could have ever asked God to give me, and a wonderful mother, grandmother, partner in life and ministry, and, humanly speaking, my best friend. In my times of sadness each day, God lifts my spirit as I thank him for her, for all the time we had together, and that we’ll be together again...next time forever in God’s eternal presence and service and with our family and the rest of God’s people! For other ways God is helping me in this matter each day, and began doing so even before Carol died, see my essay, “Preparing for Living again as an Unmarried Person” and my video testimony of his help, which you can access on the marriage page of my Web site, www.fromacorntoak12.com.

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, in a keynote message at the Langham Partnership Vision Weekend, April 2, 2016, in San Diego, CA.

² The original Greek word is παράκλητος, transliterated *paraklētos*, Helper.

Carefully observe the difference between what Jesus said and what the monist maintains. That God dwells in us does not mean we are one in essence with God, which is what New Agers and other pantheists believe and why they say everyone (and everything) is God. The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God.” The Greek and the context clearly reveals this verse to be referring to individual believers in Christ. (Previously in the third chapter he used a similar expression only with the plural referring to the whole church.) Though God dwells in us he is still different from us and far transcends us, as we’ve seen. We must recognize both his transcendence and his immanence.

Notice a striking blessing in this passage. As commentator Leon Morris points out, when Paul says your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, he uses the special Greek word, ναός *naos*, the sanctuary where God dwelt. Paul did not use the word, ἱερόν *hieron*, which referred to the whole temple complex with its buildings and courts. Earlier, in his commentary on chapter three, Morris explained that

...*naos*...denotes the shrine proper, the sanctuary. The word points us to the very presence of God. This is brought out explicitly with the assertion that the Spirit dwells in the Corinthian believers. *The Spirit of God* is not a common expression. It emphasizes the connection of the Spirit with the Father, and underlines the deity of the Spirit. The Spirit is God as He dwells in the Church. The words of this verse [1 Corinthians 3:16] are sometimes applied to the individual believer, but it is vi. 19 which speaks of the individual believer as God’s temple. Here the thought is that of the whole community of believers as God’s shrine. *Temple* is singular, but *ye* is plural. The reference is to the Church.³

Great holiness is thereby attributed to your body! Consider the implications for what we should and should not do, some of which Paul identifies in the sixth chapter.

By participating in the holy sacraments Jesus established, we experience the Lord’s immanent, intimate, and very real presence with his people. Consider for example the Lord’s Supper, which the church through the ages has also appropriately called Holy Communion.

“Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent

³ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), p. 69.

me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.” (John 6:54-57)

Fellow believers in the Lord have a different understanding of what the texts mean as to how Christ and the Holy Spirit are present, but they do not dispute that these two Persons in the triune God are truly present and that they are blessing believers in profound and extensive ways, already now but also forever! Further, since God is one, three distinct Persons sharing the same substance, and in the light of Leon Morris’ observation above, when any one Person is present, we are in communion with all of God!

Many of the errors and false teachings about God are the result of an overemphasis to the extent of the virtual exclusion of one or the other of these two characteristics. For example, Deism conceives of God as completely external to the world; he has created it and is simply allowing the natural forces to “do their thing.” He is thought of as a watch-maker who has fashioned what he has made and is just watching it all run down; he does not intervene. Deism thus errs in overemphasizing God’s transcendence. Pantheism, referred to above, errs in overemphasizing God’s immanence and ignoring his transcendence.

The Bible always portrays a balance between God’s transcendence and his immanence. These two complementary aspects of his being occur together in many texts, e.g., Psalm 113:4-9 and Isaiah 57:14-15. In addition to the above examples see also Deuteronomy 4:39: “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.”

More Practical Benefits for You

God is transcendent and sovereign; therefore, he is not controlled by any force on earth or elsewhere in the universe. He is in control of all that occurs in the whole world, including of all going on that does not please him, but which he allows for a time and through which he will bring about good ultimately. There is nothing you need that he cannot do.

In addition, you don’t have to worry. Fear mongers constantly raise new causes for concern that trouble people. Someone is always alerting us to impending disaster because the world is growing too cold or too hot or too populous. When that person takes a breath someone else is convinced cancer will afflict you if you eat too many cranberries, live too near power lines, or use cell phones. (Incidentally, these fears have been put to rest or mitigated by subsequent scientific studies.) Of course it wouldn’t be wise to completely disregard caveats from careful researchers, but I like what one believer in Christ told me at the height of the period when many were worried about a nuclear winter. He said, “Frankly, I haven’t lost one second of sleep over it.” Why? Because God’s transcendence and his immanent love and all-sufficient help were so thoroughly integrated into the fabric of this fellow’s being, he knew that no matter what occurred he would be well cared for by his heavenly Father.

Since God is immanent, he knows about your needs; and because he loves you and is transcendently capable, he will help you. “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing.” (Deuteronomy 10:18)

At one point in my ministry an especially significant challenge arose. Aware of what God says in James 1:17 (“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”), I could not help but notice constant occurrences of much that could only be called good which emerged daily in the midst of that challenging time. I sat down at my computer and began to list all these blessings, and I added to the list each day. I stopped writing when I had recorded 50 of these observations of goodness from God the Father...but the blessings did not stop; they kept coming!

How can you identify God’s blessings in your life? Where can you see evidences of how God is giving you what you need and much more? Start with James 1:17 and look all around you. Begin right where you are; you don’t even have to move! What do you see that is good? There you see where the hand of the Father has been!

For some people you may have to take an additional step or two. Some, such as those with the pioneer mentality, e.g., “I did all that myself!” you can ask, “Where did you obtain the strength to do that?” “the intelligence?” “the perseverance?”

For those who don’t see any good wherever they look, ask “Are you still breathing?” Ask the question without being sarcastic or facetious. Be gentle, and ask it in a loving manner. Those who don’t see any good may be suffering from depression. Even if the person is healthy, but just being cantankerous and/or skeptical, your love will draw him or her to Christ more than your logic, though don’t neglect the apropos use of the latter.

In Romans 8:31-32 Paul wrote that he is “convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In his immanence we see him as being close by in a loving and caring relationship with his people. He is right here with us, and he remains with us when we go anywhere else. Further, while being immanently involved with us, he does not lose his transcendence; he remains fully sovereign and all-sufficient to care for all our needs.

One aspect of this reality is what we celebrate every December with great joy: when the Second Person of the Trinity entered history taking on human flesh, the incarnation. He is called Immanuel, God with us. If you pause during the rush of this season and take some time to reflect on the deeply profound meaning of this event, you will surely experience a very merry Christmas!

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Mention at least three benefits of God’s transcendence and at least one way

you've seen each in your life.

2. Mention at least three benefits of God's immanence and at least one way you've seen each in your life.
3. When a friend expresses worry about a circumstance in his or her life, in the light of God's transcendence and immanence, what can you say to offer him or her very practical help and hope?
4. What will you say the next time someone who has a problem asks, "Where's God in all this?!"
5. How can you help people see God helping them in very practical ways by asking them to point out examples of what they see as good in their life? (James 1:17)