**Maranatha Bible Church 2020**

**Equipping Hour: Systematic Theology**

**Week 2: God’s Transcendence and Immanence**

**Introduction**

After last week, we know that God exists, through nature, through our conscience (both general revelation) and also through special revelation. We know that God has chosen to allow us to know that He exists, if He had not, then we would not know that He exists. All men, no matter what, have a knowledge of God’s existence.

This will lead us to a logical question, since God exists and only allowing us to know it by His own will, how active is He in his own creation? In other words, how does God interact with the world that He created? Is He far off, allowing things to simply take place as they may? Is He in the daily grind with us, bound by space and time, feeling what we feel, changing as we change and only allowed to work within the confines of scientific laws?

This week we are going to look at two very important concepts with regards to God. He is both transcendent (existing apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe) and immanent (existing and operating within a space). “The Bible teaches that God is both immanent and transcendent. God is present and active within his creation, but superior to and independent of anything that he has created. These biblical ideas must be kept in balance. The tendency is to emphasize one or the other will lead to a faulty conception of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

We need to have a balanced understanding of these two concepts. As Beeke points out “…hypertranscendence breaks the link of the Creator with people created in his image. Ironically, such a false transcendence collapses into hyperimmanence so that God is known only through feelings instead of rational truths. Biblical Christianity offers a much more coherent view, for it affirms the infinity of God, yet also affirms human knowledge of God.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are a couple of pitfalls that we want to steer clear of as we study this very important topic. Firstly, God is not operating in two modes. This means that God is not changing when He wants to interact with people and then changing back when He goes back to being above His creation. This would equate to the same thinking that there is one God who operates in three modes regarding the Holy Spirit, Jesus and God the Father. That heresy is called Modalism.

The second pitfall we want to steer clear from is thinking that these are attributes of God. There are attributes of God which will express more of His transcendence or immanence. But, it is important to note that God’s transcendence and immanence cut across all of His attributes, not to be defined as only an attribute. You could say, as Erickson “transcendence and immanence should be regarded as indications of how God, in all of his attributes, relates to his world.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The Importance of These Two Doctrines to Our Daily Christian Life**

1. **Immanence (God is close to us)**
   1. It is important to understand that when we speak of immanence, we are talking about God’s presence and activity within nature, human nature and throughout history.
   2. Psalm 139:7-11 “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night.”
      1. Notice what David says here…
         1. Where can I go from Your Spirit?
         2. Where can I flee from Your presence?
         3. In both heaven and Sheol, God is there.
         4. In the air or at sea, God is going to be there.
   3. Jeremiah 23:24 “Can a man hide himself in hiding places So I do not see him?" declares the LORD. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the LORD.”
      1. Can you hide from God? God fills the heavens and the earth.
   4. Acts 17:27-28 “…that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, “'For we also are His children.’”
      1. As Paul says, God is not far from any of us. It is in Him that we live, move and exist.
   5. God also sustains all things:
      1. Job 27:3 “For as long as life is in me, And the breath of God is in my nostrils.”
      2. Job 33:4 “The Spirit of God has made me, And the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”
      3. Job 34:14-15 “If He should determine to do so, If He should gather to Himself His spirit and His breath, All flesh would perish together, And man would return to dust.”
         1. Notice how Job rightly views not only his own life but also the way in which he acknowledges that God is totally in control.
            1. When it is our time to die, there are no machines which will keep us alive.
      4. Genesis 1:2 “The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.”
         1. God is not only involved in humanity, but also in creating nature/the world.
      5. Matthew 5:45 “…so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”
         1. Our natural disasters, the sun, moon, etc. are all from the hand of God. He is involved with and acts in creation.
      6. God is the God of nature, He is the God of natural law. He should also be seen as the one acting in the *ordinary events* of life.
         1. God and nature are not separate, but we must not make it into pantheism…where God and nature are the same thing.
         2. Erickson has a helpful way of looking at this “nature is not transcendent to God. Thus, nature minus God equals nothing, God, however, does have status independent of nature. So, God minus nature does equal something. In pantheism, nature minus God equals nothing, but God minus nature also equals nothing. God has not independent status.”[[4]](#footnote-4)
         3. A pantheist does not have the same view of creation as the Christian does. They must believe that nature came first, and then God from it but still part of it.
   6. **Taking immanence too far**
      1. Without proper balance in theology, one doctrine can dominate ones thoughts. This is why it is vitally important to make sure our systematic theology keeps us on the rails.
      2. If we deny (or limit) transcendence in favor of a God who is not *out there*, but only *in/down here*, there are some inherent dangers.
         1. It can become difficult to distinguish between the work of God and the normal workings of evil men.[[5]](#footnote-5)
            1. For example, in the 1930’s there were many Christians who deemed the work and acts of Adolf Hitler to be the will of God simply because it was occurring in the present time.
            2. If God is totally immanent within creation and history, there is no outside objective standard for making moral or ethical decisions.
            3. When we overemphasize the immanence of God at the expense of His transcendence, God becomes virtually a label for our own highest human values, ideals and/or aspirations.
         2. What comes out of this is officially called *Process Theology.* 
            1. This is a reality which is fundamentally dynamic and always developing, rather than static and fixed.[[6]](#footnote-6)
            2. This means that man should view God as in the daily grind with him as things are constantly changing and growing. God Himself does not know what is coming, nor has He necessarily deemed it to come to pass.
            3. Philosophically, what this means is that God may know all the possible outcomes of what *may* come to pass, but He is far too impotent to know what *will* come to pass.
         3. Both deistic and pantheistic types of philosophy are purely focused on the immanence of God.[[7]](#footnote-7)
            1. Those who are deistic in their belief simply focus on nature as their source of knowledge of God.

They believe in a god but that he simply is found all around us.

* + - * 1. As stated before, the pantheist believes too that God is not only all around us, but *in* everything around us.

They do not need to think of God as transcendent.

* + - * 1. Both of these philosophies would deny the need for special revelation as they believe God has revealed Himself through nature around us. This knowledge is sufficient for all of mankind to live a “good” life.
  1. **A Proper View of Divine Immanence[[8]](#footnote-8)** 
     1. God is not limited to working directly to accomplish His purposes.
        1. For example, when we pray for healing and someone is healed, it is obviously God’s working in their life.
        2. Also, when someone goes to the doctor, takes the prescribed meds and is healed, this is also God working in their life…perhaps without the praying saints.
        3. When someone is in need of money and a generous gift shows up out of the blue to cover their expenses, we would say it was a miracle.
        4. But, that same person finding a job to pay for his bills is no less miraculous. One, God works through His people and the other God is working how He best sees.
     2. God may not always use Christian organizations or people to accomplish His purposes.
        1. From the OT and throughout the NT, God used wicked nations and people to accomplish what He wanted done.
        2. In our day and age, there are many people who are taking care of the those whom God calls the church to care for because the church is not.
     3. We should have an appreciation for nature and all that God has created.
        1. It belongs to God. He is active and present within it.
        2. Nature was given to us to supply our needs and give us enjoyment, but we should not be so quick to exploit it for our own greed.
     4. We can study nature and the created order and learn something about God.
        1. Since God created all that we see today and is currently active in all we see today, there are clues that are present in creation which point us to God.
        2. There is logic and order within creation. There are laws which nature seems to abide by and we can use rational means to discover more about the universe which is around us.
        3. This should point us ***not*** to a series of random events which spontaneously produced a perfectly ordered system, but rather to a logical and orderly God.

1. **Transcendence (God is separate from and independent from nature and humanity)**
   1. As we will come to see, there are two very important points that should not be missed when dealing with God’s transcendence; He is not bound by creation and He is Lord of all.
   2. Isaiah 6:1-4 “In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, *lofty and exalted*, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, *The whole earth is full of His glory*." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.”
      1. What do we see here? Both the immanence (the whole earth is full of His glory) and transcendence (lofty and exalted) of God.
      2. God’s transcendence should never simply be viewed as only His greatness, power and knowledge over us.
      3. We also see here in Isaiah His goodness, holiness and purity (the Seraphim covered their face and feet and called out Holy, Holy, Holy).
   3. We see this same duality of God’s presence in Deuteronomy 4:39 “Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God *in heaven above and on the earth below*; there is no other.”
   4. Psalm 8:1 “O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!”
      1. Here David is worshipping God and mentioning that God is above the heavens. He is speaking of God’s dwelling place, as it were.
   5. Isaiah 55:8-9 “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares 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.”
      1. God is so far superior to man, both in what He does and what He thinks.
   6. Psalm 123:1 “To You I lift up my eyes, O You who are enthroned in the heavens!”
      1. Once again, God’s primary place in relation to man is above in the heavens.
   7. These verses are mainly focusing on God in reference to space and location. We would do well to understand that we have a theological problem with this.
      1. God is Spirit…He is not confined to a certain time, place or location.
      2. Also, if God dwells in the heavenlies, how is it that He is relational with us?
   8. *While it is likely impossible to fully realize how God can be somewhere when He is infinitely everywhere or how He can interact and dwell in time when He Himself resides outside of it, we should note that there are many tensions in Scripture which simply point to a Superior God.*
   9. God is fully present at every point in space, 1Kings 8:27 “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!”
      1. As Beeke points out “God’s immensity means that he transcends all spatial limitations and locations…God’s eternity means that he transcends all temporal limitations and locations, and yet is fully present at every point in time, manifesting his special presence at particular times in the most personal of ways.”[[9]](#footnote-9)
   10. **Taking transcendence too far**
       1. God is not so far above that man cannot know Him.
          1. This is shown in the fact that He sent Jesus to not just make a way for us to be reconciled, but actually accomplish our redemption and salvation.
          2. God has chosen to reveal Himself to us, though it may seem pious to think that God is so far above us and who could know us, it is actually a strike to the human will. *It is sinful man seeking to be set free from accountability to a holy God*.
       2. God is not so far removed from us that He no longer cares about what happens in or to His creation.
          1. We know that God is omnipresent (present in all places at all times) but with this doctrine, it shows that God’s presence is intensified in places for a specific time and/or purpose.
          2. God in the burning bush in **Exodus 3**, the meeting with Israel at Mt. Sinai (**Ex. 19**), His presence in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and God dwells in every believer (**Eph. 2:21-22**).
   11. **Another aspect to transcendence** 
       1. John Frame suggests that God’s transcendence should not just be limited to a spatial concept. Where we think of God as “up there” and we are “down here.”
       2. He says “we should, I think, see these expressions primarily as describing his royal dignity. God is ‘exalted’ not mainly as someone living miles above the earth, but as One who is on a throne. The expressions of transcendence refer to God’s rule, his kingship, his lordship (Isa. 66:1).”[[10]](#footnote-10)
       3. While this concept of thinking is not necessarily new, it certainly is not the mainstream thought for God’s transcendence.
       4. It is easy to see how Frame came to this conclusion and I personally do not see an issue with this line of thinking.
          1. Biblically, we read in John 3:31-34 “He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true. For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure.”
          2. Notice the language that Jesus uses, it is because He is from above (spatial) that he is above (ruler) all. You can easily see the dual use of royal dignity and an actual place from which He came.
   12. **A proper view of transcendence[[11]](#footnote-11)** 
       1. There is something higher than humans.
          1. We would do well to note that humanity is not the ultimate good or the greatest expression of morality in the universe.
          2. We should never base truth or goodness on the shifting sands of our culture or the latest opinions.
          3. Our value and worth as humans is not that we are at the top of the food chain. *Our worth and value comes to us because we are created in the image of God and He has chosen to reveal Himself to us.*
       2. God will never be completely understood or captured by human concepts or ideas.
          1. No matter how much we study God and how much we get right about God, it is impossible to exhaust the full knowledge of God.
          2. He is not limited to our understanding of Him.
       3. Our salvation is not our achievement.
          1. It is impossible for man to have fellowship with God on the basis of man’s good or perfect works.
          2. We cannot rise to God’s standards in order that we would meet Him.
       4. There will always be a difference between man and God.
          1. We are not only separated because of the effects of the fall, but God is spirit.
          2. We can never become God, now or in heaven. We will always either be humans or redeemed humans.
          3. Our salvation is not God elevating us to Him but Him restoring to us what we were supposed to be.
       5. Reverence is the most appropriate response in our relationship with God.
          1. We should never treat God as an equal or a servant.
          2. Having a robust understanding of the transcendence of God, we can never treat Him as *just one of the guys* or *another family member.*
          3. In choosing to reveal Himself to us, we should have an excited and joyful disposition towards Him. But, we should never lose respect, awe or wonder towards Him.
          4. We are His servants and His followers.
          5. We submit our wills to His will.
       6. We should be looking for genuinely transcendent works of God.
          1. We should not just expect things to be done that can be done by natural means.
          2. We use all that the Lord has blessed us with to accomplish what we need to, but we can never accomplish God’s tasks without His resources.
          3. We need to constantly be dependent upon Him and His workings.
2. ***I like how Erickson ends his section on these two topics*** “we will not look for God merely in the religious or devotional; we will also look for him in the ‘secular’ aspects of life. We will not look for miracles exclusively, but we will not disregard them either. Some attributes, such as holiness, eternity, omnipotence, emphasize more God’s transcendent character. Others, such as omnipresence accentuate his immanence. But if all aspects of God’s nature are given the emphasis and attention that the Bible assigns to them, a fully rounded understanding of God will be the result. While God is never fully within our grasp, since he goes far beyond our ideas and forms, *yet he is always available to us when we turn to him*.”[[12]](#footnote-12)
   1. This is why I have chosen to start with knowing God, and knowing God is both in the heavens watching over us and here in the present with us.
   2. We will start with the attributes (perfections) of God next week.
3. These facts about God’s immanence and transcendence should both comfort and terrify every person, especially the Christian. This is one of the ways in which this Doctrine will be advantageous to the Christian.
   1. God is near
      1. He is with you to comfort you but also to disciple you. Because God is near, we know that whatever we do, it is always in front of the Lord.
      2. The Psalms rely on this fact for those who are brokenhearted or in despair. Psalm 34:1 “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit.”
      3. Psalm 145:18 “The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, To all who call upon Him in truth.”
   2. God is Lord over all
      1. There is nothing that takes place outside of the Lord’s control. This brings comfort because it places meaning on otherwise tragic events.
         1. For example, the crucifixion of Christ. His death seemed tragic (**Luke 24**) to those who were there, but God used to save humanity.
         2. 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.”
      2. God can do whatever He wants. Psalm 115:3 “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.”
      3. Job 42:2 “I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.”
4. What if we deny this doctrine? What would we logically end up believing?
   1. “If you deny God’s transcendence, his control and authority, then you must believe that ultimate control and authority are vested in the finite world-that is the finite world is divine. If you deny the presence of God in creation, then you must believe that God is absent.”[[13]](#footnote-13)
   2. Agnosticism/Gnosticism
      1. We cannot know God
   3. Deism
      1. God is not involved nor does He care
   4. Dualism and New Age thinking
      1. God competes with and is subjected to creation
   5. Pantheism
      1. God is *literally* in all things
   6. Process Theology
      1. The world is in God
      2. This would deny transcendence and give powers which the Bible ascribes to God alone to all who are in His created realm.
   7. Materialism
      1. There is no God

“Creation is distinct from God yet always dependent on God (God is both transcendent and immanent.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

1. Millard Erickson *Christian Theology*, p. 327 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joel Beeke *Reformed Systematic Theology* , pp. 302-303 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Millard Erickson p. 274 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Millard Erickson p. 275 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid p. 280 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid p. 279 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cornelius Van Til (1997) *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* 2nd ed. New Jersey, P & R Publishing. p. 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Millard Erickson p. 281 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Joel Beeke *Reformed Systematic Theology* Vol. 1 p. 681 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Frame *Systematic Theology* p. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Erickson pp. 288-290 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid p. 290 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John Frame p. 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wayne Grudem *Systematic Theology* p. 268 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)