



FROM THE GARDEN TO THE CROSS

A 20-WEEK STUDY OF MANKIND, SIN, AND SALVATION

WEEK 1—HANDOUT 1-1: GOD’S TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

God’s Nearness and Distance: *Immanence and Transcendence*

Taken from *Christian Theology*, by Millard Erickson

Chapter Summary

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 to emphasize one or the other will lead to a faulty conception of God. While they are not attributes of God as such, they both affect his greatness and his goodness. There are significant practical implications that follow an understanding of these doctrines.¹

This chapter addresses one additional general consideration regarding the nature of God: the pair of concepts traditionally designated transcendence and immanence. These refer to God’s relationship to the created world, not in terms of specific actions with respect to the universe, but rather the degree to which he is present and active within the universe (immanence) as opposed to being distinct from and even removed from it (transcendence).

These two biblical ideas must be kept in balance. This can best be achieved by treating them together. In this respect they are like God’s love and justice, in that a correct understanding of each requires its being seen in the light of the other. Where either is

¹ Millard J. Erickson, [*Christian Theology*](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 272–273.

overemphasized at the expense of the other, the orthodox theistic conception is lost. Where immanence is overemphasized, we lose the conception of a personal God. Where transcendence is overemphasized, we lose the conception of an active God. The position we take with respect to immanence and transcendence has definite practical implications, for both the Christian's lifestyle and the conduct of the church's ministry.

Immanence and transcendence should not be regarded as attributes of God. Rather, these concepts cut across the various attributes of God's greatness and goodness. Some of the attributes are, to be sure, inherently more expressive of God's transcendence and others more expressive of his immanence; but, in general, transcendence and immanence should be regarded as indications of how God, in all of his attributes, relates to his world.

Immanence

The Biblical Basis

By immanence we mean God's presence and activity within nature, human nature, and history. There are a large number of pertinent biblical references of various types. Jeremiah 23:24 emphasizes God's presence throughout the whole of the universe. "Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?" asks the Lord rhetorically. " 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the Lord." Paul told the philosophers on Mars Hill: "He is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring' " (Acts 17:27-28).

There are also passages that note that God's Spirit originates and/or sustains all things; everything depends on him. The book of Job includes several references to the indwelling and sustaining Spirit or breath of God: "as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils" (27:3); "The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (33:4); "If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and his breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust" (34:14-15). Psalm 104:29-30 similarly emphasizes nature's dependence on God: "When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth." The creation accounts in Genesis, of course, give special emphasis to God's involvement in the creative act. In Genesis 1:2, the Spirit of God is pictured as moving or brooding upon the face of the waters. In 2:7, we read that God breathed into the man, and he became a living being. Isaiah 63:11, Micah 3:8, and Haggai 2:5 note that God's Spirit dwells within or among his people. There are also references suggesting that whatever happens within nature is God's doing and is under his control. The sending of sunshine and rain, the feeding and protecting

of the birds of the air, and the clothing of the flowers are all credited to the Father (Matt. 5:45; 6:25–30; 10:29–30).

These passages emphasize God's activity within the regular patterns of nature. He is the God of nature, of natural law. Even what are ordinarily considered natural events should be seen as God's doing, for nature and God are not as separate as we usually think. God is present everywhere, not just in the spectacular or unusual occurrences. He is at work within human individuals and thus within human institutions and movements. Disjunctions are not to be sharply drawn between either God and humans or God and the world.

The more the concept of God's immanence is developed and emphasized, the more the view moves toward pantheism, as contrasted with theism. God becomes less personal, less someone with whom we may have a personal relationship. Although immanence in an extreme form closely resembles pantheism, there is still a difference between the two views. In the view that God is immanent, nature has no independent status. As one theologian put it, 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. He has no independent status. Creation in the traditional sense has no place in the pantheistic scheme, since, according to pantheism, God could not have existed before the creation of the natural order.

Modern Versions of Immanentism

Classical Liberalism

Several movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries placed heavy emphasis on divine immanence. Classical liberalism, to varying degrees, has seen God as immanent within the world. To a large extent, the difference between fundamentalism and liberalism was a difference in worldview. The conservative operates with a definite supernaturalism—God resides outside the world and intervenes periodically within the natural processes through miracles. The conservative sees reality as occupying more than one level. The liberal, on the other hand, tends to have a single-story view of reality. There is no supernatural realm outside the natural realm. God is within nature rather than beyond or outside it.

Although liberalism is not naturalism, it has similar tendencies to view God as working primarily through natural processes rather than through radical discontinuities with nature (miracles). According to liberalism, nothing is secular, for God is at work everywhere and through everything that occurs. Friedrich Schleiermacher, for instance, saw miracles everywhere. "Miracle," he said, "is simply the religious name for event. Every event, even

the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle as soon as the religious view of it can be the dominant.”

Whereas the conservative sees God’s work particularly in special, extraordinary acts, the liberal sees God at work everywhere. The virgin birth is important to conservatives as an evidence of God’s special work. The liberal, on the other hand, retorts, “The virgin birth a miracle? Every birth is a miracle.” Conservatives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries vigorously resisted the Darwinian theory of evolution, for it seemed to render theistic creation superfluous. To the liberal, however, this was not the case. Evolution does not preclude divine activity; it presupposes it. The conservative held that the universe must have a single cause: either God caused it (more or less directly) or natural forces of evolution caused it. To the liberal, however, the statements “God created the universe” and “the universe came about through development” were not in any sense incompatible. The underlying assumption was that nature and God are not as discrete as has sometimes been thought.

This concept, applied in varying degrees, had an interesting impact on several areas of doctrine. The definition of revelation, for instance, became more generalized. In an extreme form, that of Schleiermacher, revelation is any instance of conscious insight. Thus, the Bible is a book recording God’s revelations to humanity. As such, however, it is not unique; that is, it is not qualitatively different from other pieces of religious literature, or even literature that does not claim to be religious. Isaiah, the Sermon on the Mount, Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Carlyle, Goethe: all are vehicles of divine revelation. Any truth, no matter where you find it, is divine truth. This position virtually obliterates the traditional distinction between special revelation and general revelation. Others have maintained that there is a distinction between the Bible and other literature, but have emphasized that it is a quantitative rather than qualitative difference. God works through many channels of truth, but to a greater degree, perhaps a much greater degree, through the writers of Scripture.

Liberalism also reduced the gap between God and humanity. The traditional orthodox view is that God created humans in his own image, yet they were totally distinct from God. Humanity then fell and became sinful. Liberalism, on the other hand, pictured human nature as in itself containing God, a spark of the divine. Liberals do not believe that humans’ original nature has been corrupted; rather, they view human nature as intrinsically good and capable of developing further. What is needed is not some radical transformation by grace from without, but development of humans’ potential divinity, amplification of the divine presence within. Nurturing of the strengths, ideals, and aspirations of the human race is what is called for, not a supernaturalistic alteration. Humans do not need a conversion, a radical change of direction. Rather, they need inspiration, a vision of what

they can become. The old nature is not some radically corrupted humanity. It is simply an affinity with the animal kingdom and a self-orientation, which need to be transcended.

Consequently, divine action was seen as taking place to a large extent through movements within society. The whole world can be Christianized through transformation of the structures of society. God may be as active within a particular political party or a social service organization as he is within a Christian denomination. Even aggressive policies leading to war have been seen as means by which God accomplishes his purposes.

Liberalism also modified the traditional view of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Orthodoxy or conservative Christianity had insisted that Jesus was qualitatively different from all other human beings. He possessed two natures, the divine and the human. With the movement toward synthesizing divine and human into one, this distinctiveness of Jesus became relativized. Jesus was different from other human beings in degree only, not in kind. He was the human with the greatest God-consciousness, or the one who most fully discovered God, or the person in whom God most fully dwelt.¹³ When, in a series of ecumenical radio dialogues in which I participated, someone emphasized that Jesus was unique, a process theologian exclaimed: “Jesus unique? Every human being who has ever lived is unique!” If God is immanent within humanity, he is immanent within all persons in the same sense. While there may be a quantitative difference in the extent to which God is present in various individuals, there is no qualitative difference in the manner of his presence, not even in Christ.²

Implications of Immanence

Divine immanence of the limited degree taught in Scripture carries several implications:

1. God is not limited to working directly to accomplish his purposes. While it is obviously a work of God when his people pray and a miraculous healing occurs, it is also God’s work when through the application of medical knowledge and skill a physician is successful in preventing illness or bringing a patient back to health. Medicine is part of God’s general revelation, and the work of the doctor is a channel of God’s activity. It is a dramatic answer to prayer when a Christian in financial need receives an anonymous gift of money in the mail, but it is just as much God’s doing when such a person receives an opportunity to work for the needed money.

² Millard J. Erickson, [*Christian Theology*](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 273–277.

2. God may use persons and organizations that are not avowedly Christian. In biblical times, God did not limit himself to working through the covenant nation of Israel or through the church. He even used Assyria, a pagan nation, to bring chastening upon Israel. Thus he said of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please" (Isa. 44:28). God is able to use secular or nominally Christian organizations. Even non-Christians do some genuinely good and commendable things, which contribute to God's purposes in the world, even if these works do not qualify for salvation the people who do them. Thus, when no compromise of biblical truth is involved, the Christian and the church may at times cooperate with non-Christian organizations to accomplish part of God's plan.

3. We should have an appreciation for all that God has created. Nature is not something that is there as a brute fact, something that may be plundered for our purposes. It is God's, and he is present and active within it. While nature is given to humans to satisfy their legitimate needs, they ought not to exploit it for their own pleasure or out of greed. The doctrine of divine immanence therefore has ecological application. It also has implications regarding our attitudes to fellow humans. God is genuinely present within everyone (although not in the special sense in which he indwells Christians). Therefore, people are not to be despised or treated disrespectfully. A way to show our love for God is to treat lovingly the various members of the creation within which he dwells and works. Jesus's teaching in the great eschatological discourse of Matthew 25 particularly applies here.

4. We can learn something about God from his creation. All that is has been brought into being by God and, further, is actively indwelt by him. We may therefore detect clues about what God is like by observing the behavior of the created universe. For example, a definite pattern of logic seems to apply within the creation. There is an orderliness, a regularity, about it. Moreover, it has been found that we can come to understand nature better through rational methods of inquiry. While there will be differences to be sure, there is a strong basis here for assuming that God also is orderly and that we may come to understand him better through a judicious use of logic. Those who believe that God is sporadic, arbitrary, or whimsical by nature and that his actions are characterized by paradox and even contradiction either have not taken a close look at the behavior of the world or have assumed that God is in no sense operating there.

5. God's immanence means that there are points at which the gospel can make contact with the unbeliever. If God is to some extent present and active within the whole of the created world, he is present and active within humans who have not made a personal commitment of their lives to him. Thus, there are points at which they will be sensitive to the truth of the gospel message, places where they are in touch with God's working. Evangelism aims to find those points and direct the message of the gospel to them.

Transcendence

The other aspect of the relationship of God to the world is his transcendence. By this we mean that God is separate from and independent of nature and humanity. God is not simply attached to, or involved in, his creation. He is also superior to it in several significant ways.

The Biblical Basis

A number of Scripture passages affirm the concept of divine transcendence. It is a particular theme of the book of Isaiah. In 55:8–9 we read that God’s thoughts transcend ours: “ ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ ” In 6:1–5 the Lord is depicted as “seated on a throne, high and exalted.” The seraphim call out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty,” an indication of his transcendence, and add, “the whole earth is full of his glory,” a reference to his immanence. Isaiah responds with an expression of his own uncleanness. Thus, God’s transcendence over us must be seen not only in terms of his greatness, his power and knowledge, but also in terms of his goodness, his holiness and purity. Isaiah 57:15 also expresses both the transcendence and immanence of God: “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, 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.’ ”

We read of God’s transcendence in other books of the Bible as well. Psalm 113:5–6 says, “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?” He is described as the one “whose throne is in heaven” in Psalm 123:1. In John 8:23, Jesus draws a contrast between himself and his hearers: “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.”

Models of Transcendence

The motif of God’s transcendence—the idea that God is a being independent of and superior to the rest of the universe—is found, then, throughout the Bible. We must now ask what model, what form of expression, can best represent and communicate this truth.

The Traditional Model

It is obvious from the texts we have already cited that the biblical expression depends heavily on spatial imagery. God is thought of as “higher,” “above,” “high and lifted up.” This is not surprising, for in a world where human flight had not yet been achieved, and would

not be for a long time, it was natural to express superiority in terms of elevation. These terms, however, should be seen as metaphorical.

Today, however, it is difficult if not impossible for sophisticated persons to conceive of God's transcendence in this fashion. There are two reasons for this difficulty, one deriving from general culture, and the other theological in character. On one hand, simple references to "up" and "down" are inadequate today. Our knowledge that the earth is not a flat surface and is actually part of a heliocentric system that is in turn part of a much larger universe has made this assumption untenable. Further, what an American terms "up" is "down" to an Australian, and vice versa. It will not do, then, to try to explain transcendence in terms of a vertical dimension. Speaking of God as "out there" rather than "up there" deals with this problem, but still does not come to grips with the theological problem.

The theological problem pertains to God's nature. As we observed earlier (p. 243), the question of whereness does not apply to God. He is not a physical being; hence he does not have spatial dimensions of location and extension. It does not make sense to talk about God as if his location could be plotted on astronomical coordinates, or as if he could be reached by traveling long enough and far enough in a space ship. He is a spirit, not a physical object.³

There are a number of other difficult problems in theology, such as the relationship between divine sovereignty and human free will, the relationship between the human and divine natures in the one person of Jesus Christ, and the three persons of the Trinity who are yet one God, that we cannot fully comprehend currently and will not do so within this earthly life. The same is likely true for the issues of transcendence and immanence that we have considered. The considerations that have come to light recently from physics may, however, alleviate the problems somewhat.

Implications of Transcendence

The doctrine of transcendence has several implications that will affect our other beliefs and practices.

1. There is something higher than humans. Humanity is not the highest good in the universe or the highest measure of truth and value. Good, truth, and value are not determined by the shifting flux of this world and human opinion. There is something that gives us value from above. The value of humans is not that they are the highest products of the evolutionary

³ Millard J. Erickson, [*Christian Theology*](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 281–283.

process thus far but that the supreme eternal being has made them in his own image. It is not our estimation of ourselves, but the judgment of the holy God, that gives us value.

2. God can never be completely captured in human concepts. This means that all of our doctrinal ideas, helpful and basically correct though they may be, cannot fully exhaust God's nature. He is not limited to our understanding of him. Nor can our forms of worship or styles of church architecture give full expression to what God is. There is no way we humans can adequately represent or approach God.

3. Our salvation is not our achievement. Fellowship with God is not attained by our making our way to God. That is impossible. We are not able to raise ourselves to God's level by fulfilling his standards for us. Even if we were able to do so, it still would not be our accomplishment. The very fact that we know what he expects of us is a matter of his self-revelation, not our discovery. Even apart from the additional problem of sin, then, fellowship with God would be strictly a matter of his gift to us.

4. There will always be a difference between God and humans. The gap between us is not merely a moral and spiritual disparity that originated with the fall. It is metaphysical, stemming from creation. Even when redeemed and glorified, we will still be renewed human beings. We will never become God. He will always be God and we will always be humans, so that there will always be a divine transcendence. Salvation consists in God's restoring us to what he intended us to be, not elevating us to what he is.

5. Reverence is appropriate in our relationship with God. Some worship, rightfully stressing the joy and confidence that the believer has in relationship to a loving heavenly Father, goes beyond that point to an excessive familiarity treating him as an equal, or even worse, as a servant. If we have grasped the fact of the divine transcendence, however, this will not happen. While there are room and need for enthusiasm of expression, and perhaps even an exuberance, that should never lead to a loss of respect. There will always be a sense of awe and wonder, of what Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*. Although there are love and trust and openness between God and us, we are not equals. He is the almighty sovereign Lord. We are his servants and followers. This means that we will submit our wills to God; we will not try to make his will conform to ours. Our prayers will also be influenced accordingly. Rather than making demands in our prayers, we will pray as Jesus did, "Not my will, but thine, be done."

6. We will look for genuinely transcendent working by God. Thus we will not expect only those things that can be accomplished by natural means. While we will use every available technique of modern learning to accomplish God's ends, we will never cease to be dependent on his working. We will not neglect prayer for his guidance or special

intervention. Thus, for example, Christian counseling will not differ from other types of counseling (naturalistic or humanistic) only in being preceded by brief prayer. There will be the anticipation that God, in response to faith and prayer, will work in ways not humanly predictable or achievable.

As with God's immanence, so also with his transcendence we must guard against excessive emphasis. 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.⁴

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, [*Christian Theology*](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 288–290.