

§ 3. Doctrine of God
Lecture 8
Omnipresence

I have to apologize for the laryngitis that I have this morning. I am going to do my best to croak through this lecture this morning. I've been teaching all day Friday and all day Saturday. Despite all of my tricks I didn't manage to get through without becoming hoarse. So you will have to kindly bear with me this morning. I am going to get some help from Bobby reading the Scriptures, so at least that will be clear.

The class that I've been teaching over the weekend dealt with three of the divine attributes: God's aseity, God's eternity, and God's omniscience. Two of those we've already discussed in this class. Today we turn to a third attribute of God which is his omnipresence. We want to look first at some Scriptural data concerning God's omnipresence.

The first point that we want to make is that according to Scripture God's presence is everywhere. Psalm 139:7-12 is the passage I want you to read.

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there thy hand shall lead me,
and thy right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Let only darkness cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to thee,
the night is bright as the day;
for darkness is as light with thee.

So God is everywhere present. There is nowhere that the psalmist can go where he can escape God's presence. From the realms of the underworld in Sheol to the highest heaven or the farthest part of the sea God is there.

Also, Jeremiah 23:23-24: "Am I a God at hand, says the Lord, and not a God afar off? 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." Here God says, *I am not just a localized deity*. A God at hand like the deities of Israel's neighbors. He says, "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" God is everywhere present.

A second point is that God does not dwell in a localized building. Look at 1 Kings 8:27 which is, as I recall, Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built." There Solomon, in dedicating the temple, says, *Heaven and earth can't contain God much less this temple*. He recognizes that God doesn't just dwell inside the temple in a local building.

Also look in the New Testament at Acts 17:24, 28a which is Paul's address on the Areopagus in Athens. "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man . . . for 'In him we live and move and have our being.'" The backdrop of that speech is the temple to Athena which was up on the Acropolis behind Paul on Mars Hill. Speaking to these Athenians in front of this incredible temple filled with a sixty-foot tall statue of Athena (a man could stand in her hand), he says God doesn't dwell in temples made by human hands nor is he served by human hands for in him we live and move and have our being. What a contrast to pagan deities. God isn't just in a local building of some sort.¹

START DISCUSSION

Student: Is there any comparison to other deities in and around Israel that made the same claim? Or is Jehovah the first god to make the claim to be omnipresent?

Dr. Craig: I don't claim to be a scholar in ancient comparative religions, but so far as I know the polytheistic gods of these ancient religions were not omnipresent. As far as I know, they were very localized and indeed often had material bodies and so could not be present throughout all of space. I am not aware of any analogy to the worship of Yahweh – of Israel's God – in this sense. It is, I think, quite unusual.

Student: What effect did it have then on their worship that differentiated them from those around them if they worshiped a God that was omnipresent?

Dr. Craig: Certainly one of the implications of it would be a rejection of idolatry because the pagan idols were so obviously just finite local deities that Israel found laughable. If you read Isaiah's critique of idol worship it is just biting satire. He just mocks the idea of an idol. That would be partly a reflection of God's incorporeality compared to the idols, but also I think of omnipresence. Think of the psalmist where he thinks of God as everywhere and there is nowhere he can go where he can escape God's presence. That is very different, I think, than these pagan gods and pagan religions. One thinks of Jonah in this connection where Jonah did try to escape from the Lord in this way taking the ship to Tarshish and trying to flee God's presence. Of course he was unable to. God was right there and corralling him.

¹ 5:36

Student: Would you deal with God's presence in the temple in Israel on the Temple Mount where he filled the temple?

Dr. Craig: You do have this idea of the Shekinah Glory of God where there is a special manifestation of God in the Tabernacle and in the Temple. But that should not be thought in light of the verses we have read to exhaust God's presence. It is not as though he were there and there alone. There was a special manifestation of God in the Holy of Holies but it did not exhaust his presence.

Student: I was just going to comment on the other gods that were around at that time. I think, when it says *Now there is no intermediary between God and man but the man Christ*, prior to that other beings were inserting themselves between God and man as part of the depravity that we've fallen to. That is what other religions were.

Dr. Craig: Yes, there were priests certainly that mediated between, for example, Zeus and people. But these gods themselves were very finite limited beings.

Student: I am attributing that they were mediating between – they were inserting themselves.

Dr. Craig: There wasn't any higher god beyond them.

Student: Trying to take the place.

Dr. Craig: OK, taking the place of God. Yes. But it is not as though Zeus and Mercury and these other deities were mediators to some higher being. They were it. It was just a sort of race of supermen that existed in addition to human beings.

END DISCUSSION

Let's do a little systematic thinking about God's omnipresence. It seems to me that there are two opposite errors that need to be avoided with respect to God's relationship to space.²

First of all, we should not think of God as localized in an earthly spot. That includes the church. When we say sometimes that the church is God's house we don't mean that in the sense that God's presence is there in some way that he is not present elsewhere. We can speak of the church building as God's house in the sense that it is set apart for God. It is a sacred site dedicated to the Lord and his worship, but there aren't sacred spots in the world on Earth where God is especially present in a local kind of way. God is present everywhere.

The opposite error would be to think that God is localized in heaven. I am amazed often in talking even with adult Christians who think God is in heaven sitting on a throne. That he is some sort of humanoid being that is up there in heaven and is localized there. That

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would be the opposite mistake. The doctrine of God's omnipresence says that God is everywhere present. As Jeremiah says he fills heaven and Earth. Solomon says heaven and Earth cannot contain thee. These opposite errors need to be avoided. We shouldn't think of God as localized in an earthly place, but neither should we think of him as localized in heaven.

So how does God relate to space? Well, in the same way that the Bible is underdeterminative with respect to God's relationship to time, it is also underdeterminative with regard to God's relationship to space. That is to say, it is not clear whether we should think of God as existing everywhere in space or whether we should think of him as transcending space altogether. Recall those two different views of God's relationship to time. Does God exist at every time that there is? Or does God completely transcend time and not exist in any sense in the temporal dimension? Similarly, the question here with respect to space is: is God everywhere in space or does God transcend space altogether?

Certainly the Bible speaks as though God is everywhere in space. Think of Psalm 139 again – that God is everywhere in space. But traditionally Christian theology hasn't understood God to be diffused throughout space, but rather to transcend space altogether. Since God is spirit (that is to say, he is incorporeal – God does not have a body) so obviously he is not in space in the sense of having extension or being a three-dimensional object. But neither should we think of God as some sort of invisible ether or vapor that is spread throughout space so that we are, so to speak, moving through God as we move about in the world. This would have, I think, a number of mistaken consequences. It would mean, for example, that if the universe is finite then God is finite because God would only fill the finite universe – the finite space that there is. And it certainly is possible that the universe and space is finite in which case God would be finite, not infinite. Also, this conception of God as spread out like an invisible ether would mean that God is not entirely present at every point in space. It would mean there is sort of like a portion of God inside my cup of tea and then the rest of him is outside. Or there is a certain cubic amount of God in this room but then the rest of him is outside of the room. That surely isn't correct. What one would want to say is that God is entirely present everywhere in space.

If God exists in space, he would have to be somehow related to the physical universe in such a way that he would be wholly present at every point in space rather than just partially present at every point in space.³ There is an analogy to this, and that would be the way in which my soul is present in my body. I am a body-soul composite. My soul seems to be present everywhere in my body. It is not as though my soul exists in my head in my brain, or in my heart or some other part of my body. Nor is my soul spread

³ 15:04

throughout my body like a ghost where a part of it is in my arm and a part of it is in my other arm or in my leg. Rather the union of the soul with the body would be that somehow if the soul is in the body it is everywhere present wholly in the body. The soul would not be spread out or diffused throughout the body but wholly present at every point in the body. Maybe one could say that that is the way in which God is related to the universe or to space. As the soul inhabits the body in such a way that it is wholly present at every point in the body, so God is in the world in such a way that he is wholly present at every place in space.

Certainly, the biblical view avoids any suggestion that the universe or the world is God's body. God is incorporeal. God doesn't have a body. But the point would be that perhaps he is present in the world in an analogous way in which my soul is present in my body. The difference between my soul's union with my body and God's presence in the world is that the world does not serve God as a sort of sense organ by means of which God knows what is happening in the world. God isn't dependent upon the world for his knowledge of what's happening in the way that my soul is dependent upon my eyes and my ears and my taste and so forth for navigating the world and sensing the world. So the world is not the body of God. That analogy fails in view of the fact that God doesn't use the world as a sort of sense organ in the way that the soul uses the body to sense what is happening in the world. But perhaps one could say that even though the world is not God's body that nevertheless God is wholly present at every point in space in the way in which the soul is present at every place in the body.

Some traditional medieval theologians like Anselm actually did endorse this concept of God's omnipresence. They called it the immensity of God. It is not the same exactly as omnipresence, but God's immensity connoted that God is wholly present at every point in space. He is there in a literal sense. In that sense, we really are in God as Paul says in the verse from Acts 17: "In him we live and move and have our being." This would be the notion of God's immensity. This is an element in traditional theology.

On the other hand, God is also thought to transcend space. Since God is the creator of the universe there is a state of affairs of the actual world of God existing alone without time or space. Since God is not a physical object his existence doesn't require space. If we think of God "prior to" creation or "without" the world, God would exist without space. He would be spaceless. There would be no space. Space would come into being when God creates the physical world. Perhaps, as I've suggested, time as well comes into existence at that point. At the moment of creation both time and space come to exist.

The question would be: in creating space, does God then enter into space in the way that I've argued that his creation of time would involve his entering into time?⁴ You will

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remember I argued that in virtue of God's changing relations with a temporal world and in virtue of his knowledge of tensed facts like what time it is now, if God creates time then he is immediately drawn into time and so becomes temporal at that point. Is there anything analogous to that with respect to creating space? I can't see that there is. I don't see that there is anything about the creation of space that would "spatialize" God. Why? Because although creation is a temporal act, creation isn't a spatial act. It is not an act like bumping into something or pushing something or moving something. All of those would require that the cause be in space. If you bump or push something the cause must be in space. But the creation of space, it seems to me, isn't itself a spatial act. So there isn't anything about creation that would require God to enter into space at that time.

I am more inclined to the view to say that God simply transcends space. In that case, what omnipresence amounts to is that God is cognizant of and causally active at every point in space. That is what omnipresence means. It doesn't mean that God is literally in space. God transcends space. But he knows what is happening at every point in space, and he is causally active at every point in space, causing things to happen there and causally sustaining them in existence. So God, on this conception, is a non-spatial, transcendent, infinite mind who is conscious of and active at every point in space.

START DISCUSSION

Student: When we keep referring to God here, are we talking about God the Father as that person of the Trinity? Are you making a differentiation between God the Father's omnipresence versus the Holy Spirit? I would think there is certain places where we say the Holy Spirit is not. He is not in some people.

Dr. Craig: I was speaking of God with respect to the whole Godhead. But you are right. There are passages in the book of Acts where, for example, with Cornelius' household, the Spirit fell upon them. It sounds like a very physical act almost. Then this whole notion of being filled with the Holy Spirit. It sounds in many cases like the Holy Spirit actually comes to indwell a person and live in him. On the view I am suggesting, that would be to say that the Holy Spirit produces certain causal effects there like speaking in tongues, or regeneration, being born again to a new life. But it wouldn't be interpreted literally as God is like a sort of a spirit like (I almost hate the comparison) but the way demonic possession would be where this demon literally inhabits the person's body and controls him and takes over. It would be different than that. I think it is an open question but on the view that I've suggested it wouldn't be a sort of literal spatial presence.

Student: An issue with him coming into space when he creates it, wouldn't partially an issue be he is also fully present in another realm – the spiritual realm of heaven – when he created that? Then you'd have to say if his body was the universe it seems like you'd

have to go beyond that to also his presence being not in the universe but in the heavenly realm as well.

Dr. Craig: I think that someone like Anselm would combine these two views – that God is both transcendent in the sense that, say, the universe is finite, God is not finite even though he is immense. So God would be both immense in the sense that he is wholly present at every point in space.⁵ But then also he would be causally active at and cognizant of every point in space and wouldn't be exhausted so to speak by his presence in space. I think someone like Anselm would want to combine these two views. I think that deserves more thought. This is an area that is very under-explored in Christian philosophy today. There has been lots of philosophers writing on God and time but almost no one is working on God and space. So if you are a young philosophy student thinking of what would be a good doctoral dissertation topic, here is one where you can, I think, make a real contribution.

Student: Several times in Scripture, God has told sinners they will depart from him. People have used that as a way to say that hell is a place from which God has removed his presence. What do you think about that?

Dr. Craig: That is a wonderful question. The doctrine of omnipresence would say that God is present in hell. If he were not causally active there and cognizant of what is happening there, hell would just be annihilated. It wouldn't exist apart from God's sustaining presence. So God is certainly present in hell. But I think what the Scripture means when it says that these persons are separated from the face of the Lord or God's presence is speaking of a relational presence. He may be there but they are not related to him so they have no consciousness of him, no experience of him. It would be as though God were utterly absent to them. But he would be ontologically or metaphysically present, but not relationally present.

Student: I like the idea of putting new doctoral students to work, so my question is if God is causally active in every point what consequences might that have for the proposal of theistic evolution?

Dr. Craig: Well, are you asking me or these doctoral candidates? *[laughter]*

Student: You, for anything that you know or anything you think could be explored or worked on.

Dr. Craig: This raises the question of miracles. When I say God is causally active at every point in space, I am not necessarily saying miraculously. When we get to the doctrine of divine providence and talk about God's relationship to the world, I think we will see that God is causally active in everything that happens in the world, but he can

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work through the secondary causes rather than immediately in a sort of miraculous way. We don't want to maintain that God works in the world only in a kind of immediate miraculous way. That is a doctrine called occasionalism which was held to by certain medieval Islamic philosophers and in modern Western philosophy by a French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche. What they said was that when you hold the match to the cotton and the cotton combusts and turns black and smoldering, the fire doesn't really cause the cotton to combust. What happens is that merely on the occasion of the fire coming into proximity with the cotton, God causes the cotton to combust. So really there are no secondary causes. Things in the universe don't cause anything. Everything is caused by God. You can see how that would fit in with Islamic determinism and fatalism. We don't want to affirm that. I think we want to affirm that God has created things in the world that have causal powers and God gives them a certain autonomy to produce their effects. He cooperates along with them to make those effects. He works through secondary causes. With respect to evolution, the question would be: did God choose to work through the means of random mutation and natural selection to bring about biological complexity, or did he intervene miraculously to produce new lifeforms without the instrumentality of secondary causes? That would be a different question.⁶

Student: It seems like in dealing with the Godhead, we've talked about God the Father. You've dealt with the Holy Spirit a little bit. But when we deal with Jesus Christ and his resurrected glorified body which we know has certain capabilities that we don't have with these bodies, I would address it to the idea of the Catholic view of transubstantiation where they have the Eucharistic celebration and believing the actual change. You talked about that under the Doctrine of Christ. The idea of Christ being able to be point-localized possibly around the world at the same time in all of these Eucharistic celebrations.

Dr. Craig: You are absolutely correct to draw our attention to these debates over the real presence in the sacraments. This is where medieval theologians reflected most upon God's relationship to space – not in some abstract philosophical sense, but in the context of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. They distinguished all of these different ways in which something could be present in space, and argued that Christ's body could be present in this very special way in the Eucharist that is different in the way a chair or table is present. You are absolutely right in saying these debates are very relevant to the issue here.

END DISCUSSION

Let me just wrap up this morning by saying whatever view you take of God's relationship to space, I think we can all agree on the fundamental point that the omnipresence of God

⁶ 30:00

means that there is no place to which God's knowledge and power do not extend. That would be common coin regardless of which view you take. There is no place to which God's knowledge and power do not extend.

In our next class we will look at what application this truth has to our personal lives.⁷