

DOCTRINE OF GOD

DIVINE OMIPRESENCE



Truly, Lord it is in the inaccessible light in which You dwell . . . My understanding is not able to attain to that light. It shines too much, and my understanding does not grasp it, nor does the eye of my soul allow itself to be turned towards it for long. It is dazzled by its splendor, overcome by its fullness, overwhelmed by its immensity, confused by its extent. O supreme and inaccessible Light, O whole and blessed truth, how far You are from me who am so close to You! How distant You are from my sight while I am so present to Your sight! You are wholly present everywhere and I do not see You. In You I move and in You I have my being and I cannot come near to You. You are within me and around me and I do not have any experience of You.¹

What a prayer. These words were written and uttered by the **Saint Anselm (1033-1109)**, the Benedictine monk who became the Archbishop of Canterbury. What is so moving is the fact that Anselm was a brilliant thinker, theologically well read, and a committed Christian apologist. Yet, he did not allow the head-knowledge to remain merely cerebral. Instead the head knowledge expanded, enlightened, and elevated him into a deeper and more intimate vision of God. It is only in such intimacy that such a prayer can be made.

Equally I am comforted that such a great man of God acknowledges his own finitude and struggle to “feel” God and “know” that He is ever-present. Do you notice Anselm continually focuses upon the fact that **God is a far**? We are forever before God’s sight and yet Anselm says, “I do not see You . . . I cannot come near You . . . I do not have any experience of You.” Ever feel this way?

God can *feel* as if He is almost nonexistent relationally at times. Such feeling is a dreadful business. Many times, actually I would argue most of the time, it is because such feeling is on us. Notice even Anselm admits as such by his continual usage of “I do not see . . . I cannot come near . . . I do not have experience . . .” I, I, I is the key. Most of the time our lack of FEELING God is deeply existential and moral. It is often, if not always, due to unrepentant sin or a lack of spiritual discipline or because of a deep loss or hurt. We are human. This is our reality, and we need to acknowledge it. **But**, deeply, such ways are inextricably linked to our lack of the “presence” of God.

Do you notice how Anselm’s awareness of God’s presence shaped his prayer? While he keeps saying “I” don’t “see” or “feel” he always couples the “I” with “He” and “You.” We are “present to His sight” and in Him we “move and have our being” for “You [oh God] are with me and around me.” **The frail human feelings of God’s absence are absorbed by the reality that GOD IS NEAR.**

GOD is truly near. He is everywhere. That reality changes everything. Like it changes Anselm’s prayer life it can change us to put our feelings aside or rather remold them within the transcendent truth.

In more technical theological terms God’s “nearness” is known as His “omnipresence” which is from the Latin omnis “all” and praesens “being before/at hand.” It is the understanding that God “**transcends spatial limitations and so is present at all places at once in his total being.**”² There is no particle in the Universe that God is not present to it. There is not galaxy far away enough that God is not aware and located at and within it. There is no place without God’s presence. As one writer put it, “**God is in touch with every aspect of creation [and He] cannot be excluded from any location or object in creation.**”³ Now, before I start preaching, lets pause and do some biblical data!

¹ Saint Anselm, *Prologion*

² John Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), pg. 249

³ Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1992), pg. 47

BIBLICAL DATA ON DIVINE OMNIPRESENCE

There are many scriptures that talk about God, time, and eternity. Let us break down the scriptures down into each of the following points:

(1) THE BIBLE SPEAKS OF GOD'S PRESENCE BEING IMPOSSIBLE TO ESCAPE: There are plenty of scriptures that speak of it being impossible to go beyond the presence of God. God's presence is ubiquitous and unbounded:

- 23 "Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? 24 Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.
Jeremiah 23:23-24 (ESV)
- 7 Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
9 If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
10 even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.
11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.
Psalms 139:7-12 (ESV)

(2) THE BIBLE SPEAKS OF GOD'S PRESENCE BEING UNLIMITED TO ONE LOCATION: There are many scriptural passages that get across the understanding that God's presence is not locatable — that is to say, it cannot be bound or limited to one place:

- "22 O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath. . . . 27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! 28 Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, 29 that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. 30 And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive."
1 Kings 8:22 & 27-30 (ESV)
- Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? 2 All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD.
Isaiah 66:1-2 (ESV)
- 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. . . . For "In him we live and move and have our being"
Acts 17:24-25 & 28 (ESV)

(3) THE BIBLE SPEAKS OF GOD’S PRESENCE BEING SPECIALLY MANIFEST TOWARDS BELIEVERS & UNBELIEVERS: There tons of scriptural passages that get across the idea that God’s presence is not relegated to some mere metaphysical abstraction but can be displayed relationally in positive ways towards His people and negative ways towards His enemies:

(a) Towards believers God’s presence is a “**covenantal presence**”⁴ which is His relational commitment, His constancy, His manifest promises and blessings, and His correction and judgement towards His people. Consider:

- **22** Now Hazael king of Syria oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz. **23** But the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now.
2 Kings 13:22-23 (ESV)
- You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.
Psalms 16:11 (ESV)
- **21** Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” **22** Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” **23** Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. **24** Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.
John 14:21-24 (ESV)

(b) Towards unbelievers and even those who are believers that fall into sin God’s presence can signify spiritual rupture, trembling, and judgement. Consider:

- **13** But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. **14** For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind. **15** Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him.
Job 23:13-15 (ESV)
- Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence—²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
Isaiah 64:1-3 (ESV)
- **36** you [false teachers] pervert the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts, our God. . . **39** therefore, behold, I will surely lift you up and cast you away from my presence, you and the city that I gave to you and your fathers. **40** And I will bring upon you everlasting reproach and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten.”
Jeremiah 23:36 & 39-40 (ESV)

⁴ Excellent section on this comes from John Frame’s chapter “*The Lordship Attributes: Covenant Presence*” in his *The Doctrine of God*, pg. 94-102

THINKING THROUGH: GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO SPACE⁵

There are two broad competing worldviews that speak of God's relationship to space that I think are worth mentioning. By going over them we can get some clarity in understanding how the Christian vision is coherently distinct. Consider:

(A) GOD & SPACE: KEEPING FROM TWO EXTREMES

(1) **PANTHEISM** – God is the Universe. God is equal to space. Space is inseparably linked to the nature of God because He really is space. Another subversion of this is pantheism which is this idea that the Universe is linked to God like our bodies are linked to our souls – the Universe becomes the body of God. Neither makes sense of philosophical or biblical reflection on God:

- **Philosophically** if God is the Universe then that would mean the Universe is eternal, but an eternal Universe cannot be for at least two reasons: (a) you cannot have an actual infinite regress into the past, because you could never have the present moment and you cannot traverse an actual infinity; (b) all modern science actually affirms that the Universe had a beginning; (c) because of (a)-(b) God cannot be space because by definition God is the Greatest Conceivable Being and a being that began to exist and is finite isn't such a being. Even more so if the Universe began to exist, and God is indistinguishable from the Universe, then God began to exist, but to begin to exist would mean God would already have had to have existed in order to create Himself, which is purely illogical.
- **Biblically** this doesn't make sense of any of the biblical data. The data of scripture shows that God created everything that exists. Anything that is not God is a creature and therefore relies on Him for its existence and its continued existence. The Biblical data shows us that God is not restricted by anything, He is the GREAT I AM, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the Creator Who holds the world together.

(2) **DEISM** – God is wholly transcendent or distant from the spacetime Universe. God is but the "Blind Watch-Maker." He is not active in the world in any meaningful way ontologically or relationally. God did create the Universe, but that is it. He allowed natural laws to take their course, do their work, and He sits back and lets what happens happen. But again, such a view doesn't make philosophical or biblical sense of everything that we know:

- **Philosophically** God is the Greatest Conceivable Being (GCB) – this is just an inescapable feature of who God is so it will continually come back in any discussion we have! If God is the GCB then He doesn't just happen to exist, He isn't a being among many beings, He necessarily is the Ground-of-All-Existence. This means there is nothing that doesn't rely upon Him for its origin or sustained existence. There isn't anything outside or beyond God's reach, view, or essence. As Aristotle understood, God is the "Prime Mover;" nothing can escape His ontological touch because in the absence of Him there would be nothing at all and in the absence of His will nothing would do what it does.
- **Biblically** this view denies the immanence of God. He wants to so detach the world from God as to make the world somehow its own demi-god, and human reason somehow becomes the arbiter in all truth. It doesn't work. It is a foolish delusion of grandeur to think you can somehow uncover the hiddenness of God on your own merits. God is in all and through all (Ephesians 4:6).

So, both a pantheistic and deistic view of God is inadequate to what we know about God philosophically and biblically. Therefore we need another far more robust understanding of God's relationship to space. Enter the Christian perspective.

⁵ Great article on omnipresence from *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/omnipresence/>

(B) WHAT HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN SAID ABOUT OMNIPRESENCE?

The Christian perspective is that God transcends space yet is immanent within it. The words of **Saint Augustine (354-430 A.D.)** are helpful,

“[God is] he who is wholly everywhere, included in no space, bound by no chains, mutable in no part of his being, filling heaven and earth with omnipresent power, not with a needy nature. Therefore he governs all things in such a manner as to allow them to perform and exercise their own proper movements. For although they can be nothing without him, they are not what he is.”⁶

So, Augustine affirms, God is “bound by no chains” and that all creatures “can be nothing without him [yet] they are not what he is.” In short God is boundless spatially and yet equally present in all of Creation, sustaining it in its existence, while not being Creation itself.

Some 1,300 years after Augustine, the Puritan clergyman **Stephen Charnock (1628-1680)** said of God’s relationship to space,

“[God] is not limited by place. A body or spirit, because finite, fills but one space; God, because infinite, fills all, yet so as not to be contained in them, as wine and water is in a vessel. He is from the height of the heavens to the bottom of the deeps, in every point of the world, and in the whole circle of it, yet not limited by it, but beyond it.”⁷

God, Charnock affirms, is “in every point of the world... but beyond it.” *Bodies* and *space* are finite terms that do not apply to an incorporeal infinite being [we will talk about the attribute of incorporeality later].

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) the renowned Dutch Reformed theologian and scholar put it like this,

“Space and location are attributes of all finite beings. It is implied as such in whatever is finite. Whatever is finite exists in space. Its limited character carries with it the concept of a ‘somewhere.’ It is always somewhere and not at the same time somewhere else. Regardless of all measurable distance from other points (extrinsic location), and intrinsic location is characteristic of all creatures, not excepting even spiritual beings. In another dispensation distances may be totally different from those we know here on earth, just as steam and electricity have already greatly altered our ideas of distance. Yet a limited and local existence will nevertheless always be characteristic for all creatures.”⁸

Everything that is creaturely is by definition finite, Bavinck says, and therefore is necessarily spatially confined. Everything that is a creature has a “somewhere” but such a characteristic does not apply intrinsically to God. Also notice that Bavinck affirms that a “somewhere” characteristic is something applicable even to spiritual beings. Angels, demons, disembodied souls are not “aspatial” (non-spatial). They are entities that extrinsically interact with space quite differently, but they are finite locatable entities and therefore spatial. None of these kinds of features apply to God because He is boundless, infinite, incorporeal, and necessary, therefore He is spaceless.

And probably one of my favorite descriptions of omnipresence comes from the great American pastor and author **A.W. Tozer (1897-1963)**,

“Omnipresence means that God is all-present. God is close to everywhere. Here is near to everything and everyone.... God is equally near to all parts of His universe.... [He] fills heaven and earth just as the ocean fills a bucket which has been submerged in it a mile down. The bucket is full of the ocean, but the ocean surrounds the bucket in all directions.... The omnipresence of God requires that wherever there is anything—even hell—the presence of God must be.”⁹

⁶ Saint Augustine, *City of God*, Book VII, 30

⁷ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, DISCOURSE VII - ON GOD'S OMNIPRESENCE, available at https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/charnock/attributes_p.pdf

⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pg. 166

⁹ A.W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God: A Journey Into the Father's Heart*, Vol. 1 (Camp Hill, PA: Wing Spread, 2003), pg. 118-120

(C) WHAT OMNIPRESENCE IS NOT

So, what do we gather from what all these philosophers, theologians, and the Bible have said about the nature of omnipresence's? Well, let us try and grapple with this idea of omnipresence by discussing wrong ways of thinking about omnipresence. This will help to shave away some common misunderstandings about this theological concept. Then we will say what omnipresence is. So, consider the following:¹⁰

- (a) **GOD IS NOT PHYSICALLY ANYWHERE IN THE UNIVERSE** — In other words, God's being is not like some gaseous ether stretching out or exuding across the cosmos. If this were the case, then God would be finite yet extended. Furthermore, God would be quantifiable; some percentage of God is on Earth, in America, in the room you are reading this, and so forth. This is foolishness. God's essence, His being, is not reducible or quantifiable (remember divine aseity and simplicity).

Some ancient theologians used to say, "God is nowhere and somewhere" (Plotinus) or "God contains all but is uncontained" (Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen) which is getting across this idea that specific location does not apply to God. Or consider the Medieval theologians' concept of the IMMENSITY of God, which gets across the idea that God is unrestricted, unbounded, existence. God is not "somewhere" because He fills everywhere. One of my favorite quotes in line with this quote is Saint Augustine who affirmed, "To discover where [God] is, is hard; to discover where he is not, is even harder."¹¹

- (b) **GOD IS NOT SPATIALLY LOCATED EVEN IN A HEAVEN** — This is a shock to many hearers, but it needs to be said. God is NOT located in heaven. Heaven, although spiritual is not spaceless. Heaven has independent definable features, objects, and people that inhabit it (angels, cherubim's, the saved...ect) and it has dimensionality to it. But God is not "bound" or even located there like some cosmic Zeus in the clouds looking down at us on a throne.

Yes, the Bible speaks of God being "in heaven above" (Deuteronomy 4:39) and setting His glory "above the heavens" (Psalm 8:1) and that He is "enthroned on high" (Psalm 113:5). And yes, the Bible speaks of God "coming down" to see what mankind is doing (Genesis 18:21) and that Jesus affirmed He came "from heaven" or "from above" (John 3:31 & 6:36). However, **such language is about God's transcendence not His location**. The concept of transcendence, that God is over all, is used by the biblical authors with the "language of height," but such language is **not spatial but rather in terms of authority or lordship**.¹² God's "aboveness" in the Bible is getting across His divine rule, kingship, lordship, authority, and sovereignty over all Creation.

Heaven is always depicted as "above" in the Bible, and in all ancient literature, because it is getting across the idea that heaven is NOT ON EARTH. Any direction away from earth is "above."¹³ Heaven is a place, for sure, and it is called God's "throne" (Isaiah 66:1) but even the language of "thrones" should not be pressed as literal. Rather "throne" is used symbolically to depict a place where God's presence specifically and intimately manifests.¹⁴ Heaven therefore is God's "throne", because it functions like the earthly tabernacle (Hebrews 8-9), which was a throne, in that it is the dwelling place of God's special manifest presence.

THE POINT: Just remember that Heaven is a creation of God that is filled with creatures just like the physical spacetime Universe and therefore it cannot be a place where God is wholly localized. Therefore, Solomon could say upon dedicating the temple,

5 The house that I am to build will be great, for our God is greater than all gods. 6 But who is able to build him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for him, except as a place to make offerings before him?
2 Chronicles 2:5-6 (ESV)

¹⁰ These points are adapted from John Feinberg, *ibid*, pg. 249-251 and Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), pg. 166-168

¹¹ Saint Augustine, as quoted by Herman Bavinck, *ibid*, pg. 168; original source is *The Magnitude of the Soul*

¹² John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), pg. 103-107

¹³ John Frame, *ibid*, pg. 105

¹⁴ John Frame, *ibid*, pg. 581-582

- (c) **GOD IS NOT A CONCOTION OF SPIRITUAL ENERGY, SPACE, & MATTER** – We already made this point when we spoke about the problems with pantheism and panentheism, but I want to point it out again here. God is not every point IN space but rather works WITH every point in space in a concurrent way. It is not as if each molecule and each propositional truth and each metaphysical principle combined is the totality of God. No. God is not an idea and He is not a planet and He is not a Universe and He is not these things combined. Remember that God is SIMPLE and A-SE!

Furthermore, God does not work WITH every point of space as if the space is somehow His body. As if He needs the space to do something. His transcendent power and infinity trump such notions and therefore do not apply to the concept of omnipresence.

- (d) **GOD IS NOT PRESENT METAPHYSICALLY AS HE IS MORALLY PRESENT** – What this means to say is that God AS BEING (remember: He is not A being among many, but is the GROUND OF BEING *aseity*) is necessarily the foundation, the ground, the Unmoved Mover, the Pure Actuality, of all existence. This means that He is the **ontological ground**¹⁵ of all existence – He gives everything its existence, holds everything together, and gives everything its meaning. This does not mean therefore that because He is the ground of all existence that somehow, He *legitimizes* the unbeliever's blasphemy, or the sinner's sin, or the pagans cultic practices (remember under the biblical data the "covenantal" versus "judgmental" ways God's presence is manifest). It simply means God sustains all "beings" and all "becoming" by His own existence, because He is Ultimate Reality. Morally and relationally however God works in and through people in a very different way. More on this in a moment.

¹⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ontology-metaphysics>

(D) WHAT OMNIPRESENCE IS

So, then how shall we try and understand the ways in which God IS PRESENT in the world and beyond? What is omnipresence? Well, one of the most succinct statements of omnipresence comes from the theologian and philosopher **Norman Geisler (1932-2019)** who stated,

*"[Omnipresence] means that all of God is everywhere at once. As the indivisible Being, God does not have one part here and another part there, for He has no parts. God is present to but not part of creation. God is everywhere, but he is not anything. He is at every point in space, but He is not spatial. He is at every point in space, but he is not of any point in space. . . . God is 'in' the universe but not 'of' it: He is 'in' it (better yet, it is in God) as its Cause (Col. 1:16). However, He is not part of the effect. All of God is everywhere, yet no part of God is anywhere, since He has no parts."*¹⁶

Let us try and break down what Geisler has said more systematically. Omnipresence gets across the following:

- (a) **OMNIPRESENCE MEANS GOD IS ONTOLOGICALLY EVERYWHERE WHOLLY AT EACH POINT** – What this means to say is that God is the foundation, the metaphysical grounding, that makes everything exist. God is BEING, He is EXISTENCE, He is THE ABSOLUTE, He is PURE ACTUALITY. If God did not exist, then you couldn't have anything at all. Because God is the Greatest Something (Being), He necessarily grounds all other somethings (beings and becoming). In this way God presence sustains all of existence. Also take note this idea says God is "wholly at each point" which means that He is not quantifiably spread throughout Creation (Universe, Heaven, Hell . . . ect) but is EQUALLY or SIMULTANEOUSLY present in the COMPLETENESS OF HIS BEING at every point in space.

This is why in a strict philosophical sense (if you remember back to the ancient Church Fathers or Augustine) you cannot really say that God is "here" or "there." Yes, the Bible will use this language – God "came down" or God "moved" or God "walked to" – but that is because we are humans trying to use human words to describe God. Such language is analogical terminology.¹⁷ Or, it may be meaning God's "presence" in a more relational sense (more on that in a moment). If you are having difficulty trying to grasp this, that is good! It's marvelous to grapple with the immensity and infinite of the Great God we call Father! Nevertheless, to help, consider a few analogies to get this "wholly present" aspect across. Again, it is always important to recognize that analogies are human ways of trying to grasp at that which is beyond full comprehension. They therefore are imperfect. That said, nonetheless, they can be helpful:

- **BEAUTY IN A SUNRISE** – You cannot look to one particular aspect of the sunrise and say, "Ah! There it is! Beauty!" Rather the beauty is holistically present within and throughout the sunrise in every aspect that makes it up. The trees, the horizon, the clouds, the colors, the existential moment – collectively ARE THAT WHICH IS BEAUTIFUL. So beauty as a category is present not at one point but at each point fully.
- **THOUGHT IN A SENTENCE** – When you look at particular words in a sentence you cannot look at only one word and affirm, "There is the totality of meaning." The meaning of sentences transcends, in a sense, the individual tokens (or words) of the sentence. The meaning is found "holistically" or "immanently" within all the words. YET, every word contains meaning in itself doesn't it? But the "fullness" of the "higher meaning" of the sentence is not found in just one word but in the totality of the words.
- **THE MIND IN THE BODY** – Your mind and your body interact in such a way that the mind is causally active and cognizant of the entirety of your body. That said, you cannot point to or open just one section of your body and say, "There 'I' am!" The soul or mind is not "located" like an ether or a ghost across your body but is, as said, everywhere present and active simultaneously at each point within your body.

¹⁶ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology Vol 1: God and Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2003), pg. 170

¹⁷ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), pg. 255

(b) **OMNIPRESENCE MEANS GOD IS RELATIONALLY AND SPIRITUALLY PRESENT TO HIS CREATIONS IN DIFFERING DEGREES** – What this means to say is that when we use the word “omnipresent” we need to make sure we are distinguishing between two senses of that word – metaphysically/ontologically AND/OR spiritually/relationally. God as the GCB is necessarily the ground of all existence, but this does not mean that He relates to all creatures or locales in the same way morally or religiously. As Bavinck said,

“God does not dwell on earth as he does in heaven, in animals as in humans, in the inanimate as in the animate creation, in the wicked as in the devout, in the church as he does in Christ. Creatures differ depending on the manner in which God indwells them. The nature of creatures is determined by their relation to God. Therefore, though all creatures reveal God, they do so in differing degrees and along different lines. . . . God dwells in all creatures through his being, but in no one other than Christ does the whole fullness of deity dwell bodily [Col. 2:9]. In Christ he dwells uniquely: by personal union. In created beings God dwells according to the measure of their being: in some in terms of nature, in others in terms of justice, in still others in terms of grace or of glory. There is endless diversity in order that all of them together might reveal the glory of God.”¹⁸

So, the point is well seen. There are “degrees” of God’s relational presence (or “covenantal presence” *John Frame*) depending on the nature and status of the creatures. As Tozer put it “there is a dissimilarity between moral characters.”¹⁹ This means that while God is present in Hell (Psalm 139:7-8) in a “sustaining existence” kind of way, He is not there relationally.²⁰ Hell IS THE ABSENCE OF GOD’S RELATIONAL PRESENCE. As Paul affirmed in his second epistle to the Thessalonian Christians,

⁸[God] in flaming fire, [will] inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might
2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 (ESV)

This also means that God sustains ontologically the sinner and the blasphemer in existence even as they sin and blaspheme (Job 12:10; Colossians 1:17). But this does not mean that He is somehow ethically responsible for their sinning or blaspheming. In fact, it is a sign of grace (Matthew 5:45; Ephesians 2:4-5).

¹⁸ Bavinck, *ibid.*, pg. 169

¹⁹ Tozer, *ibid.*, pg. 123

²⁰ Great article by John Piper on God’s presence absent from Hell: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-god-everywhere-and-absent-from-hell> and an article from Got Questions <https://www.gotquestions.org/God-in-hell.html>

APPLICATION

- (1) **ALL OF LIFE IS SACRED NOT JUST PARTS OF IT** – The omnipresence of God in a very real sense means there is no place where God is not accessible in an intimate or meaningful way. This is hard for us to grasp but this is an internal psychological problem, not a theological one.²¹ Such a truism should reshape how we view all of life.

God's infinite "presence" means all of life is sacred. I am not meaning in some New Age hippy way, as if all is the mother-goddesses energy, but rather all of life is, in a very real sense, "touched" by God. Has God manifest Himself in special ways to specific places? Yes! The Garden, Mount Sinai, Mount Carmel, the Tabernacle, and so on. But these places are not therefore somehow "more sacred" than the rest of the world. All the world is God's inhabitation. All of life is sacred. This means there is no aspect of life that is not under the purview of God's presence or knowing. As the great American evangelical theologian and philosopher, **Francis Schaffer (1912-1984)** said,

True spirituality covers all of reality....The Lordship of Christ covers all of life and all of life equally. It is not only that true spirituality covers all of life, but it covers all parts of the spectrum of life equally. In this sense there is nothing concerning reality that is not spiritual....

Christianity is not just a series of truths but Truth - Truth about all of reality. And the holding to that Truth...and then in some poor way living upon that Truth, the Truth of what is - brings forth not only certain personal results, but also governmental and legal results.²²

Christianity, therefore, is not an aspect of our lives, it is the all-encompassing way we should see the world and live in it. This means you nor I can live a smorgasbord or dichotomized life of "sacred" and "secular." Where we give a few things over to God and leave the rest for ourselves. It all belongs to Him!

- (2) **FAITH IS NOT A RITUAL OR A PLAY** – As one theologian rightly said, "[Faith] does not consist in making a pilgrimage but in self-abasement and repentance."²³ In other words, it's a heart condition. Too often we localize or spatialize our relationship with God by overly externalizing it. Here me out! Many times, we make our relationship with God about "going here" or "going there" – I went to this bible conference, I went to this revival, I go to this church – and we miss that God is WITH us everywhere. Am I saying these things do not matter? Not in the slightest, but very often we are susceptible to wearing masks or playing roles with God based on where we are at or who we are with.

So, when we are with certain friends our mouth is a trash-heap and when we go visit out poor blue-haired grandmother we act all sweet and righteous and when we go to a church service we smile and curtsy. This was a major problem with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They localized God. They made it out to be that He was somehow just present at the temple or Holy of Holies rather than intimately WITH THEM and IN THEM. But this is foolishness. There is nothing we do and there is nowhere we go that God is not present in that moment.

When you localize God or spatialize Him then you are far more susceptible to hypocrisy and sinful behavior, because you believe, foolishly, that you are somehow hiding from Him.

²¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), pg. 300

²² Schaffer, Francis. *The Abolition of Truth and Morality*. (<http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=42393&columnid=4545>)

²³ Bavinck, *ibid*, pg. 170

(3) **GOD TRULY IS NEARER THAN YOU THINK** – God is truly Immanuel. He is God with us. Yes, this speaks specifically to the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity into bodily form, but it also speaks to a God who is immanent and transcendent. As an author has said so effectively,

“If we live our lives daily in the presence of God, that presence impinges powerfully upon each discrete moral choice. The serious beholder of space, whether macrocosm or microcosm, acknowledges with awe that God meets us in every meeting, each moment, each twinkling of the eye, every millimeter of space—God is with us.”²⁴

God can be known intimately where you are!

This means that to abandon God is not “a matter of local separation but of spiritual incompatibility.”²⁵ Think of how we can be disconnected from people that are physically around us. We even use the language of distance in a relational way – “Stay away from me!” or “I want to put space between you and me” and so forth – to get across a dissimilarity.

Remember when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden (**Genesis 3**)? God “comes into” the Garden and asks, “Where are you?” (v. 9). Why would God ask this if He knows all and is everywhere? **The question is not spatial, it’s existential.** The question is not for God, it’s for Adam. God knows where Adam is, Adam doesn’t know where he is because He has lost sight of God.

Through the Fall the heart and the mind are darkened, and a rift of alienation is created between God and Man (**Ephesians 4:18**). As one author has put it, “It is the heart that puts distance between us and God.”²⁶ But the answer is not to flee from God but to run towards Him! Why? Because He is the light that makes everything come into focus (**Psalm 119:105; John 8:12; 1 Peter 2:9**). I love the words of **Saint Augustine** on this point. Listen to his words as we close this section,

When you want to do something bad, you withdraw from the public and hide in your house where no enemy may see you; from those parts of the house that are open and visible you remove yourself to go into your own private room. But even here in your private chamber you fear guilt from some other direction, so you withdraw into your heart and there you meditate. But he is even more deeply inward than your heart. Hence, no matter where you flee, he is there. You would flee from yourself, would you? Will you not follow yourself wherever you flee? But since there is One even more deeply inward than yourself, there is no place where you may flee from an angered God except a God who is pacified. There is absolutely no place for you to flee to. Do you want to flee from him? Rather flee to him.
Augustine, Expositions on the Psalms, Psalm 74

²⁴ Thomas Oden, *John Wesley’s Spiritual Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), pg. 36-37

²⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pg. 170

²⁶ Tozer, *ibid.* pg. 126-127