

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 5

God (Part 4)

A recent Sunday night, I found myself in New York at a kosher, vegetarian, Chinese restaurant eating dinner with a group that included a Buddhist who had been raised Roman Catholic but had recently decided to practice the Jewish religion of her husband. We discussed religion and God, and the conversation was fascinating!

The Catholic turned Buddhist turned Jew explained her position that God had created all that exists. Religion was the point of connection with this divine Creator, and while no one point of connection was necessarily any better than any other, it was important to connect to the Creator. This woman was impressed with her husband's devotion to his Jewish religion and so she had converted to it, making it her connection point to the divine rather than her prior Buddhism.

I asked each person around the table to explain to me their religious journey with an eye toward where they were now. After each person explained their beliefs, the question was asked me, "Your turn, Mark, where are you on these issues?"

I considered the diverse nature of the table and thought, how do I best explain my views? I would like the table to know that while I nodded and showed that I understood the views of the others, I did not actually share those views. I wanted to shout "THERE IS ONLY ONE CONNECTION POINT TO GOD AND IT IS JESUS!" and then point my Catholic/Buddhist/Jewish friend to John 14:6 where Jesus said, *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*"

Knowing that a verbal body slam to the mat followed by a quote from scriptures no one at the table acknowledged but me was probably not the best approach, I tried a different tact. I explained my conviction that there was indeed a being we call "God" who exists outside this universe of space and time. "God," as we call him in English, created the world, space, and time, and made man. God exists as a being of infinite measure. He is moral. He is personal (as opposed to a mechanical force or impersonal cosmic energy). God made man as a personal and moral being. God made man to be in a relationship with the Divine.

Then, I explained that man had chosen to operate outside of God's morality, and in biblical terms, "fell" from God. The challenge for humanity, and the point of

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religion was restoration of that relationship. Before I could get any further, my multi-approach friend interrupted me. “Wait a minute,” she said. “That cannot be. God made everything. God is in the universe, not beyond it. There is no beyond. And so everything has some of God’s nature in it. So God made both good and evil. That means God contains both good and evil.” When I said I did not agree with her, she asked incredulously, “How can you say that without denying that God created everything?” I told her that I did not believe God made everything in that sense. I did not believe that God created evil.

She was stunned. She took it as a given that God was throughout the universe in all its aspects good and evil. I tried to explain that I believed God existed within the universe, but also existed independently outside of the universe and outside of space and time. I wish I had the opportunity to explain to her two terms, the immanence of God and the transcendence of God. The time and opportunity was not there for us, but it is here today!

Today, we look at Paul’s theology of God as Creator, as a being both transcendent to the universe and yet also immanent. These are words and concepts worth knowing, so let’s get started!

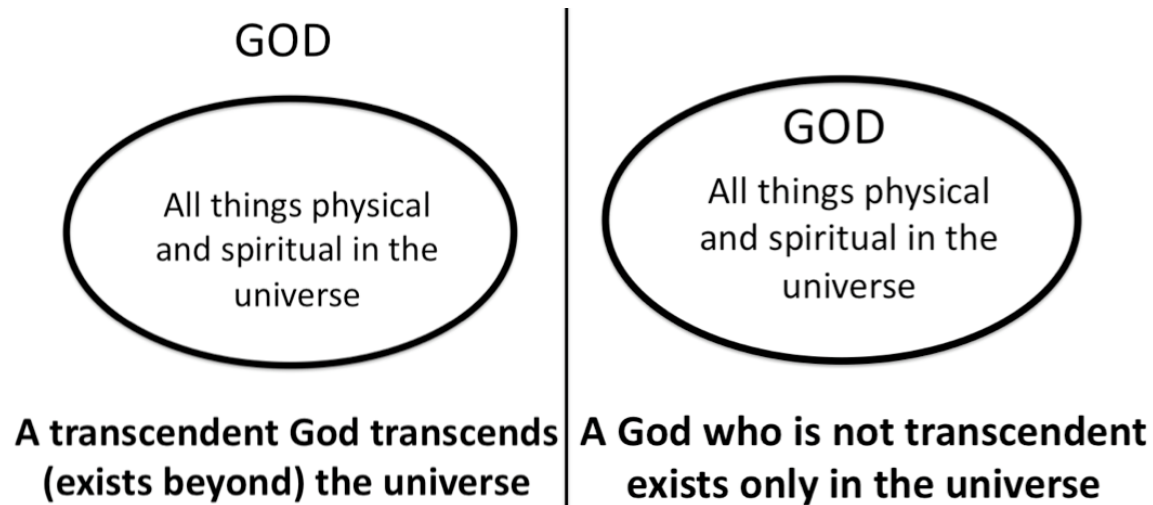
GOD AS CREATOR– TRANSCENDENT

My dinner friend would have readily agreed with me (and with Paul) that God had “created all things” (Eph. 3:9). Our issue would be on *how* God went about this creation. We are not referencing here the common debates over aspects of “creation” versus “evolution.” Rather, we are considering whether God’s creation was simply an existence of himself, a moving around and reorganizing matter that was already present, or something altogether new.

The big difference between my friend and I would center on whether God exists now, or at any other time, beyond the physical or spiritual matter of the universe.

If we were to draw a circle and include within it every thing of the universe, this means all things physical and all things spiritual, then would we find God only inside the circle or would we find him also outside the circle? Does God have an existence independent of the universe and its substance? Is God present *beyond* the world? If so, then God is “transcendent” in that he transcends or goes beyond or is independent of the universe. If not, then God is not transcendent.

Consider the following two diagrams:



With these ideas in place, we turn to Paul.

We do not find in Paul a deliberate discussion of the space-time continuum,¹ to which scientists like to refer. But as we are looking at Paul's theology, and not simply a verse-by-verse exposition of his writings, we have a chance to put Paul into modern thought on issues such as these. We can examine Paul's writings to understand whether he saw God as a captive within the universe or as one existing outside the universe, outside time, outside creation.

As we conduct this examination, we find in Paul's thought God as "invisible" who "created all things, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" through and for Christ (Col. 1:15-17). We also find Paul writing of God as, "the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim. 1:17). Similarly in 1 Corinthians 8:6, we read Paul affirming, "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist."

From the spirit of these passages, we can fairly assess that Paul wrote of God, and considered God as one beyond the mere confines of the world. God as Creator was not simply expressing his own boundaries in creation. God who "created all things, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" is bringing into existence matters that previously had no existence.

¹ Originally, the idea was that space occupied three dimensions, but time presented the universe with a fourth dimension. Gradually, the concept has grown to include the physical attributes of the universe, whether three dimensions or more, tied in with the history or time aspect of the universe.

Scholars sometimes use a few Latin phrases to discuss the nature of God's creation. Three are relevant here:

1. *Creatio ex material* (meaning creation out of material already existing);
2. *Creatio ex deo* (meaning creation out of the essence or being of God); and,
3. *Creatio ex nihilo* (meaning creation out of nothing).

God being "transcendent" means that he did not simply create the world out of his own essence (*creatio ex deo*), but that he created it out of nothing. Here, we find Paul. Paul wrote of God as one who not only "gives life to the dead" but also, "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). God's work, Paul writes, was not simply to use the "low and despised thing in the world," but even the things that "are not" in order to prevent humanity's boasting before God (1 Cor. 2:28-29).

Paul taught and wrote of God as creator from nothing, not simply from himself or from some pre-existing matter. For Paul to find God simply within the walls of creation would be to limit God in ways Paul never does.

Paul recognized God as independent of the created things, not bound by space or time – God as infinite, not limited. Paul wrote as one who saw God beyond the earth or the heavens. As Solomon the Wise professed in dedication of the Temple, "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!" (1 Kings 8:27).

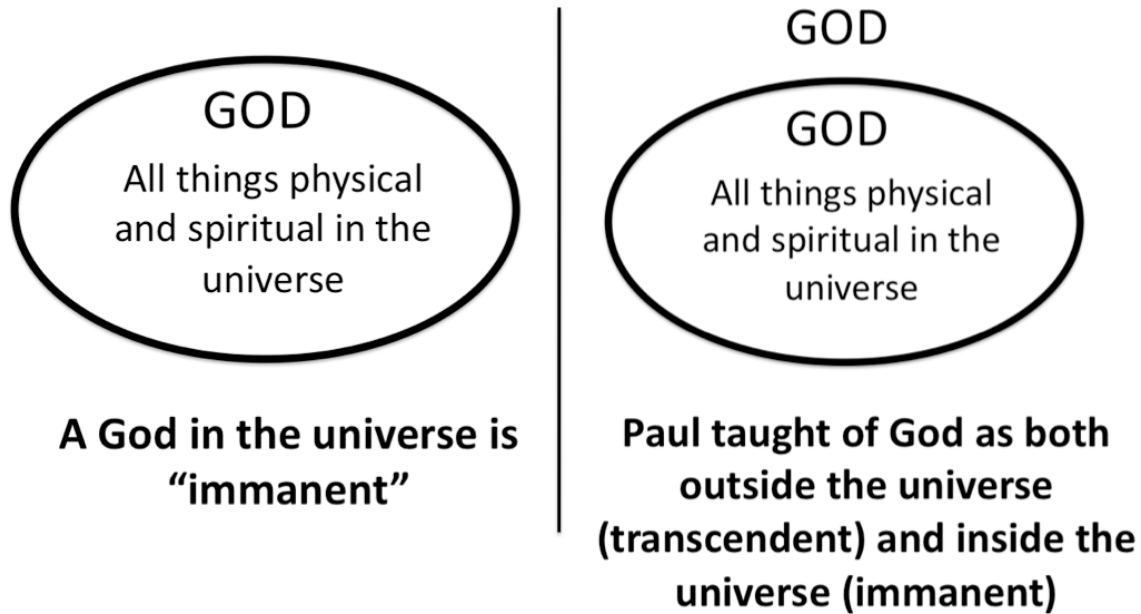
While Paul clearly understood God beyond the created universe, Paul never considered God as removed from the universe. Here, we see Paul's affirmations and teachings on what scholars today term the "immanence" of God.

GOD – IMMANENT

Paul taught that there is an essential presence of God in the created universe. God is not simply *beyond* the universe, but he is intricately *in* the universe as well. When we speak of God as present in the universe, we speak of him as "immanent."

What does it mean, though, to speak of God as "in the universe"? Does it mean that God *is* the universe? Do we consider God in all things so that all things have a spark or bit of God's soul or spirit within them? Or, maybe God is just present in living things, so all living things have divinity and should be treated accordingly?

Paul does not speak in a way that affirms these questions. Paul speaks of God as filling the universe in several senses, but never as being one or a part of the universe. For Paul, and indeed the rest of scripture, God is present in the universe in his **authority**, in his **power**, and by his **knowledge**.



God is present in the world in his **authority** much like a king is considered regally present in his entire kingdom. As Paul writes, God is the “King of the ages” both “immortal” and “invisible” (1 Tim. 1:17). This is God regally present not only today, but always, past and future. Part and parcel of God’s regal presence is that all things in the universe are subject to God. God reigns and rules over all matters in the universe, and is able to place all things under the feet of Christ (Eph 1:22).

God is also present in the universe through his **power**. This divine power is evident in the very existence of the world. Paul asserted to the Romans that God’s “invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world” (Rom. 1:20).

God is present in the universe by his **knowledge**. There is nothing present that God does not see and discern. Paul constantly refers to God as his “witness” (Rom. 1:9, Phil 1:8, etc.) for God has all insight and knowledge.

So, Paul does not affirm an animistic or pantheistic belief that all things have a spark of the divine, or that all things are, to some degree, God himself (or itself). Paul sees God as present in and throughout the universe, but still distinct from the

universe. In this sense, we might consider the sun's rays as they course through space toward earth. The rays penetrate space, but they are distinct from space. The presence and influence of the sun's rays, even in the midday atmosphere of earth, should never be confused with the space or air they occupy.

The 17th century Puritan Stephen Charnock wrote nine discourses on the existence and attributes of God. In this seminal work, Charnock well explains this difference. Charnock writes that God fills heaven and earth, but is not mixed with heaven and earth!²

When Paul addressed the Athenian philosophers, Paul spoke of God as one who "made the world and everything in it" (transcendence). But, Paul went further and quoted approvingly an early Greek writer we believe to be Epimenides³ stating, "He is actually not far from each one of us, for, 'In him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:24-28). Paul understood that God is truly present with all humanity (immanence). Similarly, in Ephesians 4:6, Paul writes of God the Father "who is over all and through all and in all." Here too, however, we must be careful not to misunderstand Paul.

As we consider God "in all" we see that Paul never taught that all humanity had God within them in the identical way. For Paul understood that the Christian had an indwelling of God that was of a different nature and character than the presence of God in all created things. Paul knew and spoke of the indwelling of God through his Spirit in the Christian. Paul would pray for the believers to be "filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19). Paul understood also that Christians together constitute the body or temple of Christ in a way that shows a special indwelling or presence of God with the church. "In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:21). Paul uses this same language explaining the importance of unity to the Corinthians writings, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16).

In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul draws another distinction between the presence of God in general in humanity versus the special indwelling of God in his church. Paul is teaching the importance of not being "unequally yoked with unbelievers." Paul's whole point of "unequally yoked" is that there is a difference between the indwelling of God in believers versus unbelievers. Paul quotes Leviticus 26:12 writing, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God and they shall be my people."

² Stephen Charnock. *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Baker Books 1996) p. 374.

³ This original poem did not survive antiquity, so scholars cannot state for certain where it is from.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. God “chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4).

In Ephesians 1:4, Paul writes that God “chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world.” Inherent in Paul’s statement is the recognition that God exists outside of space and time, outside of the world. This is certainly part of the definition of transcendence, but the term goes further. When we speak of God as transcendent, we mean not only that he exists outside of the created world, but also that he is, to someone in the world, unknowable. It is the idea that someone could never have a clear knowledge or picture of something that exists beyond the dimensions of our own existence.

What we know of God must come from God’s revelation of himself. God does this in the world, within space and time through the words of scripture, through the evidence of creation and the world, and through spiritual confirmation of his presence within the believer. In these ways, the Spirit of God reveals truths of God that “the natural person does not accept” (1 Cor. 2:14).

2. “Where shall I flee from your presence?” (Ps. 139:7).

God is immanent. He is here–now–today. You cannot go anywhere from his presence. You cannot hide your thoughts from him. He knows who you are, what you think, what you do. And, he loves you. He has sought you out. He knows your struggles. He knows your hard roads. He will never leave or forsake you. He is here.

Surely, this is part of the message Paul prayed for the Ephesians to understand more fully when he prayed, that “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” (Eph. 1:17). Paul knew well Psalm 139:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful, it is high; I cannot attain it.

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; for the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

3. "You formed my inward parts" (Ps. 139:13).

Here Psalm 139 continues from Point for Home 2:

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.

You are not an accident. It is no surprise or coincident that you are alive, or for that matter, that you are in this lesson today. There is a Creator God who made you and calls you by name. He made you to be in a relationship with him. He has paid the greatest personal price so you might call him Father and share eternity in his kingdom. He has made an entry into his kingdom through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his Son. Do not miss this.