

#### 4. Omnipresence

Today we turn to a fourth attribute of God, is his omnipresence. The question of divine eternity and God's relationship to time naturally raises the analogous question of divine omnipresence and God's relationship to space. Just as an eternal God can be conceived to be either temporal or atemporal, so an omnipresent God can be conceived to be either spatial or aspatial, that is to say, either God may exist in space or God may transcend space. If God does exist in space, then His omnipresence requires that He exist, not merely somewhere, but everywhere in space or omnispatially.

##### a. Analysis

###### (1) Scriptural data

We want to look first at some Scriptural data concerning God's omnipresence.

The biblical data pertinent to divine omnipresence almost one-sidedly support God's omnispatiality.

The first point is that according to Scripture God is present everywhere. Psalm 139:7-12:

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 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!

The question remains as to the theological weight to be ascribed to these passages. Here we do well to recall the point respecting God's relationship to time, that the biblical writers may have lacked the reflective context for raising questions about divine temporality vs atemporality—the same goes for God's spatiality vs aspatiality. The purpose of the passages we read is not to teach metaphysics but to remind or assure us of God's universal sovereignty, inescapability, and accessibility. Indeed, the thrust of passages about God's dwelling in heaven is to emphasize His transcendence, not His spatial location. In saying that even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain God, Solomon's prayer actually leans in the direction of God's transcending space. Even though God's heaven, like the physical heavens (skies) are described in spatial language, so that God may be said to sit on His throne in heaven (Ps 11.4; 103.19-21), to look down from heaven (Ps 14.2; 33.13; 53.2; 113.5-6), and to descend from heaven (Gen 11.5, 7; 18.20-21), such language is anthropomorphic on any account and may be figurative language indicative of God's transcendence (cf. Eph 4.9-10; II Cor 12.2). Biblical authors were well aware that Gen 1.1 teaches that in the beginning the transcendent God created the heavens and the earth, so that everything that exists apart from God was created by Him (Jn 1.1-3). If space is a substance, then, given divine aseity and *creatio ex nihilo*, it is an implication of biblical teaching that space was created by God. The transcendent God is certainly active in space and knows what is going on everywhere in space, but is He

literally in space Himself? Once again, the biblical data are underdeterminative, putting the question into the hands of the philosophical theologian.

## (2) Systematic Summary

Let's do a little systematic thinking about God's omnipresence. First, God doesn't exist just in a certain locale. Here there are two errors to avoid:

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 on Earth where God is especially present in a local kind of way. God is present everywhere.

The other error would be to think that God is localized in heaven. I am often amazed 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 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 him. 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? 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 is immaterial), obviously he is not in space in the sense of being a localized 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 fill only 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. It would also imply that God has a shape as well as a size. Also, this conception of God as spread out like an invisible ether would mean that God is not wholly present at every point in space. It would mean there is 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 wholly present everywhere in space.

So 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. 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 just in my head, in my brain, or in my heart or some other part of my body. Nor is my soul spread throughout my body like a ghost where a part of it is in my left 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 wholly present everywhere 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. But the point would be that perhaps he is present in the world in a way analogous to the 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 buds 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 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.

But then God, being wholly located at every point, seems to have the geometrical properties of that point. Points have geometrical properties, too, and removing a point from space leaves a hole of a certain size and shape in spacetime. On such an account, God is not merely spatially limited, He is infinitely small. He occupies no non-point-sized region, much less the maximal region of space as a whole. If we say that God is wholly present at both every point in space and every region of space, then we are back to the implication that God has a shape and size.

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 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? You will 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 pulling 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 therefore more inclined to the view 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.

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 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.