The All-Present God

"As Charles Haddon Spurgeon once observed, there are very few things as uplifting for the heart and the mind as a serious study of the being and attributes of God. Hopefully, this little article on God's omnipresence will encourage some others to take up such studies for themselves. They won't be disappointed." –Dr. Michael Gleghorn

Introduction



We can never get away from God. To some, this is quite threatening. To others, it is merely irritating or annoying. But for those who know and love God, it is deeply comforting and consoling, for it means that we are never alone.

In this article, I want to discuss an attribute of God that is often referred to as *omnipresence*. It's a big word, but all it means is that God is present everywhere. It was while meditating on this attribute that David was led to pen the oft-quoted verses of Psalm 139:

> Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast (vv. 7-10).{1}

Clearly David took comfort in the fact that he could never get away from God, that there was nowhere he could go where God was not.

In a similar manner, King Solomon also spoke of God's omnipresence in his prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. He said, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Here, Solomon recognizes that unlike human beings, God's presence cannot be localized to merely one place on the earth. Indeed, the universe itself is not sufficient to contain the being of its Creator!

So how is the doctrine that God is everywhere present to be understood? And what practical applications might this have for our lives?

To begin, it is helpful to observe that just as the doctrine of God's eternity attempts to explain how God is related to time, the doctrine of omnipresence attempts to explain how He is related to space. Does God completely transcend space? That is, might He exist completely "outside" or "beyond" our spatial universe in some sense? Or is it better to think of Him as existing everywhere throughout all space? Then again, could it be the case that He somehow exists both within *and* beyond the created order? Obviously, these are deep and difficult questions. But since thinking through such things is part of what it means to love God with our minds, let us ponder these matters as carefully as we can (Mark 12:30).

God and Space

Other Scriptures certainly seem to affirm God's omnipresence. God asks the prophet Jeremiah, "Am I only a God nearby . . . and not a God far away? . . . . Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (23:23-24). Here the Lord affirms that He is present everywhere, that there is nowhere in heaven and earth where He is not. But how should we understand this?

Should we think of God as "spread out" through the universe like an invisible gas? Although this might be the mental image

which most naturally suggests itself to our minds, we should carefully avoid embracing it. After all, "God is spirit" (John 4:24). And a spirit, unlike a gas, is a *non-physical* entity.{2} If we think of God as being spread throughout the universe like an invisible gas, then we might be tempted to think of God as only *partially present* at any one place. For instance, we might come to believe that there is a small amount of God in our bedroom, even more of Him throughout our house, and more still in the three-mile radius around our house. And this, I'm sure you would agree, is crazy!{3} We *don't* want to think of God's omnipresence in *these* terms.

Instead, if we want to think of God as existing everywhere in space (and many theologians would caution us against this), then we ought to think of Him as being *fully present* at every point of space *at the same time*. Now admittedly, this is a difficult concept to grasp. But an analogy may help to clarify the point.

A number of Christian theologians and philosophers have suggested that we should think of God's relationship to the world as similar to the soul's relationship to the body. On one construal of this view, the soul is held to be "spatially present in the body," but "not extended throughout it." Instead, it's thought to be "somehow wholly present at all points in its body." In a similar way, it is said, we can also think of God as being "spatially located in the universe" and yet "wholly present at every point in it."{4}

Of course, it must be emphasized that this is *only* an analogy. I'm certainly *not* suggesting that the world really *is* God's body!{5} The analogy is intended simply to help us understand *one way* in which God might be thought of as omnipresent. But it's not the only way.

God and Spacelessness{6}

Many Christian philosophers do not believe that we should

think of God as *literally present in space*. Instead, they believe that God completely transcends space, existing "beyond" or "outside" the spatial universe which we inhabit. But if this is so, then how do they think the doctrine of God's omnipresence should be understood? Moreover, *why* do they believe that God is not present in space?

Let's take the second question first. Why think that God isn't present in space? Well, say these thinkers, consider the doctrine of creation. God created the universe *ex nihilo*, or "out of nothing." Literally nothing existed (except God) "before" He brought the universe into being.{7} In other words, prior to creation, not even space existed. Rather, space is brought into being by God at the moment of creation.{8} But if God does not exist in space *prior* to creating the universe, then why should we think that He is located in space *after* bringing the universe into being? According to this view, there just isn't any good reason for thinking that He is.

But wait a minute! If God isn't located in space, then how can it still be said that He's present everywhere? Doesn't this amount to a denial of God's omnipresence? According to proponents of this view, we should understand God's omnipresence to mean that He both *knows* what is happening everywhere in space and that He is *active* at every point in space.{9} In other words, God not only knows what is happening everywhere on earth, He also knows what is happening elsewhere in our solar system and in every galaxy of the universe. Moreover, He is continually exercising His power to sustain the universe in being and He is able to act anywhere He desires throughout this vast cosmos which He has created. Hence, even if God is not *literally* present in space, advocates of this view still insist that He both knows what is happening and is able to exercise His power anywhere in the world at any time He chooses.

Having now considered the two major views regarding how we

should understand the doctrine of God's omnipresence, we'll briefly look at some of the difficulties that are raised by this doctrine.

Difficulties with Omnipresence

Recall how David in Psalm 139 affirms that there is nowhere he can flee from God's presence, for God is present everywhere. But this raises a difficulty, for elsewhere in the Bible David says something which seems to directly contradict this sentiment.

Pursued by Saul in the Desert of Ziph, David, who had the opportunity to kill Saul but humbly refused, pleaded with Saul not to shed his blood "far from the presence of the Lord" (1 Sam. 26:20). But wait a minute! If God is present everywhere, as David elsewhere affirms, then what sense does it make to speak of dying far from the presence of the Lord? How can one be far from the presence of the Lord if the Lord is present everywhere?

It seems to me that the best way of handling these difficulties is to make an important distinction regarding the *way* in which God is everywhere present. What I mean is this. Although God is present everywhere, He is *uniquely present* at certain times and places when He desires to reveal Himself in some special way.

The best example of this is the unique incarnation of God the Son in the man Christ Jesus. Jesus was one person with two natures, one divine and one human. According to His divine nature, He remained omnipresent even during His time on earth. Yet in his human nature, Jesus was limited (like all other men) to a particular time and place. And it was in this more limited sense that God specially chose to reveal Himself to us. Hence, in the Gospel of John we learn that God's grace and truth, His love and salvation, His blessing and glory, are all uniquely revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.{10}

In a similar way, concerning the example of David above, we can say that while God was certainly present in the Desert of Ziph, He had chosen to specially reveal Himself to the people of Israel. He was thus present to the people of Israel in a way that He was not present to the other nations. It is in this sense that David pleads with Saul not to shed his blood "far from the presence of the Lord."

The Importance of Omnipresence

Let's think about this in terms of a "good news/bad news" approach, beginning with the "bad news" first. Although God's omnipresence, considered in itself, is really only good news, there is certainly a sense in which sinful men and women, much like you and me, might be tempted to regard this doctrine as bad news. Why is that?

Well, if God is always present, then like it or not, every evil thought, word, or deed that we think, say, or do is always done directly in His presence! That's a sobering thought, isn't it? There is literally *nothing* that we can ever do in a hidden or secret way. Whenever we lie or steal, commit adultery or take God's name in vain, we do so in the presence of the God to whom we are all ultimately accountable. Indeed, Jesus warned that on the day of judgment we will even have to give an account for every "careless word" which we have spoken (Matt. 12:36)! This, at least for sinners like ourselves, is what we might call the bad news of God's omnipresence.

But as I said previously, the reality is that God's omnipresence is actually very good news. For it means that no matter what our circumstances, God is always present! When we're anxious or scared, God is there. When we're under pressure at work or having difficulties in a relationship, God is there. Yes; even if we're sick or dying, God is present then, too. David wrote in the Psalms, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they

comfort me" (Psalm 23:4). For the one who's been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, the fact that God is always present is very "good news" indeed!

I hope you can see that the doctrine of God's omnipresence is not just an interesting issue for philosophers and theologians to ponder (although it is certainly that). It's also an extremely practical doctrine that is highly relevant to almost every aspect of our lives. For wherever we go, whatever joys we encounter or difficulties we face, God is there. And for the Christian, He is present as our Protector, Savior, Counselor, and Friend!

Notes

1. All Scriptural citations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.
2. See, for example, Jesus' remarks in Luke 24:39: "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."
3. I got this insight from William Lane Craig, "Doctrine of God," Part 8 [Podcast] (accessed August 2010), available from http://bit.ly/9ruR74.
4. These quotations come from the discussion in J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 509-10.
5. Of course, some theologians (e.g., Process theologians) *do* believe that the universe is God's body. According to them, God is like the soul of the world (which is His body). This view is usually termed *panentheism*, which is not the same as pantheism.
6. This section is particularly indebted to the discussion of omnipresence in Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 509-11.
7. I put "before" in quotation marks since, if God is timeless without creation, there really isn't literally any temporal moment "before" God brings the universe into being. The

universe, along with time itself, simply has its beginning at the moment of creation. Nevertheless, for the purpose of communicating to our radio audience in the limited amount of time available, it is much easier to simply say “before” creation.
8. Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 510.
9. Ibid., 510-11.
10. In this regard, please see John 1:1, 14-18; 3:16-21.

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