

## RECOVERING TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

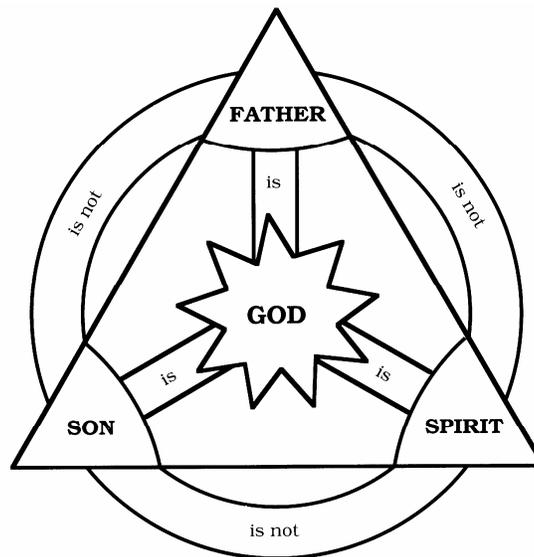
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Jack K. Willsey

### Definitions of the Terms

Transcendence and immanence are relational, not spatial terms. They define the way persons relate to each other. Transcendence has to do with *otherness*, the fact that one person is not another person, nor an extension of another person. Immanence has to do with closeness of relationship; with the aspects of relationship which produce unity or a point of identity. The former carries the idea of *being outside*, the latter of *being inside* some relational category.

The only model of the two aspects in perfect harmony is the Trinity. Each person of the Trinity is transcendent to each of the others; that is, each person *is not* one or both of the others. At the same time, in sharing the same essence co-equally and co-extensively, each person *is God*. To describe this relationship, theologians use the term *perichoresis* (περιχωρησιῶν).<sup>1</sup> Also known as *emperichoresis* (εμπεριχωρησιῶν) coinherence and circumincession (Latin: *circumcessio*, *circuminsessio*), this Greek term was developed by John of Damascus (c. 675-c.749) to describe the interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity, who share the divine essence. The personal distinctions are not diminished, but the substance of the godhead is also not divided. Thus, each person is fully involved in the existence and actions of each of the others, but remains a distinct individualization of the essence. The following diagram, which properly pictures the two aspects, dates from ancient times.<sup>2</sup>

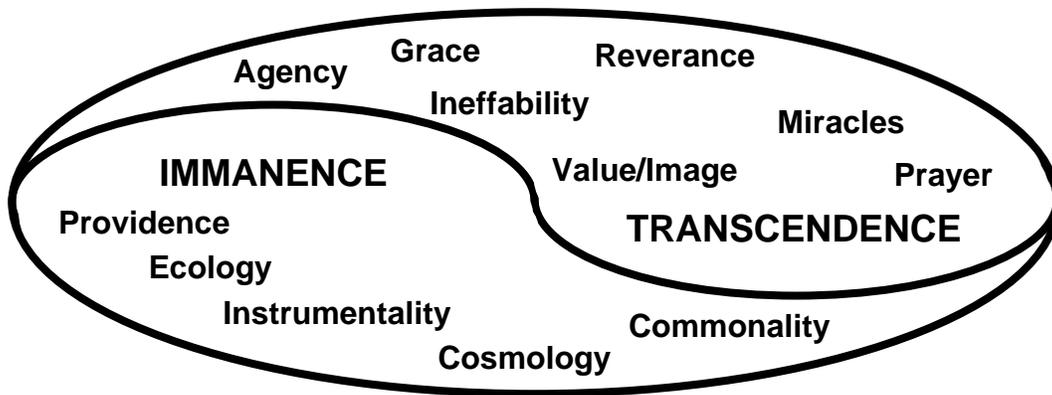


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<sup>1</sup>The word is derived from the classical Greek verb, περιχωρηω. In the New Testament, only the noun, περιχωρησις occurs.

<sup>2</sup>Copied from: H. Wayne House, Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 45.

The second most common use of the terms in theology involves God's relationship to creation. Almost all, if not all, theological heresies and wrong practices are based in some way upon an imbalance in understanding between the transcendence and immanence of God. These two categories are not to be thought of in tension or in conflict, but in constant, harmonious balance. God is simultaneously present with or in his creation and separate or distinct from it. He is transcendent to his creation in that it is not an extension of himself. He is not one with his creation. The existence of creation does not change God's existence in any way. He is immanent to his creation in that he is always everywhere personally present and active. He is able to be immanent because of his omnipresence, but the two are not the same. Omnipresence (or immensity, as it is often called by theologians) is an ontological category, while immanence is a purely relational category. A good discussion of these categories is provided by Millard Erickson.<sup>3</sup> The terms used in the diagram below are partly derived from his discussion.



An over-emphasis on immanence may result in such heresies as monism, theological liberalism, pantheism, or panentheism. It will almost certainly include a weak view of sin. An over-emphasis on transcendence may result in deism or neo-orthodoxy. Theologians must constantly work to achieve a balanced perspective. Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson observe:

Because the Bible presents God as both beyond the world and present to the world, theologians in every era are confronted with the challenge of articulating the Christian understanding of the nature of God in a manner that balances, affirms and holds in creative tension the twin truths of the divine transcendence and the divine immanence. A balanced affirmation of both truths facilitates a proper relation between theology and reason or culture. Where such balance is lacking, serious theological problems readily emerge. Hence an overemphasis on transcendence can lead to a theology that is irrelevant to the cultural context in which it seeks to speak, whereas an overemphasis on immanence can produce a theology held captive to a specific culture.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 327-345 (chapter 15, "God's Nearness and Distance: Immanence and Transcendence." [First edition, 1983, chapter 14, I:301-319.]

<sup>4</sup>Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 11-12.

A third use of the terms involves human relationships. Humans may, and should, relate to each other in both ways. Failure to achieve balance between the two results in unsatisfactory or even abusive relationships. Likewise, a Christian world view must balance concern for the immanent world with anticipation of the transcendent world to come.

### Historical Development

#### Scholasticism and Modernism

Western Christianity today has been shaped to a surprising degree by intellectual currents that date back to the scholastic period.<sup>5</sup> This era may be defined as:

...the medieval movement, flourishing in the period 1200-1500, which placed emphasis upon the rational justification of religious belief, and the systematic presentation of those beliefs. "Scholasticism" thus does not refer to a *specific system of beliefs*, but to a *particular way of organizing theology*—a highly developed method of presenting material, making fine distinctions, and attempting to achieve a comprehensive view of theology.<sup>6</sup>

This is the period in which such scholars as Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and John Wycliffe were influencing the course of Christian theology. The modern tendency of western thinking toward analytical, logical, and abstract formulations of doctrine is rooted in the writings of the time.

Two schools of thought developed, which reflected the issue of the relationship of transcendence and immanence. These were, in the earlier part of the period, realism; and in the latter part, nominalism. Realism was promoted by Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, while nominalism, also known as the Modern Way and the Modern Augustinian School, was represented by William of Ockham and John Wycliffe.

The difference between the two systems may be described as follows. Consider two white stones. Realism affirms that there is a universal concept of "whiteness" which these two stones embody. These particular stones possess the universal characteristic of "whiteness." While the white stones exist in time and space, the universal of "whiteness" exists on a different metaphysical plane. Nominalism, however, asserts that the universal concept of "whiteness" is unnecessary, and instead argues that we should concentrate on particulars. There are these two white stones—and there is no need to start talking about "a universal concept of whiteness."<sup>7</sup>

These differences are very important to theological and philosophical perspective. Both have value and govern essential approaches to truth. When one eclipses the other, however, the result is detrimental to biblical faith. It is important to note that all of the influential thinkers involved in the scholastic controversies were Christians who were trying to move the theological project forward. As is often the case, the results of their emphases would not be worked out in practical form for centuries. While realism may have been too abstract, it preserved the concept of transcendent (universal) realities, and

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<sup>5</sup>An excellent treatment of historical factors is: A. J. Conyers, "Three Sources of the Secular Mind," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 41 (June 1998): 313-321.

<sup>6</sup>Alister E. McGrath, Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 105. Italics in original.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 106.

emphasized an *a priori* concept of truth, logical deduction, and the ability of the mind to perceive reality (rationalism). On the other hand, nominalism furthered scientific research and modern philosophical thought by focusing on immanent realities, an *a posteriori* approach to truth, logical induction, and empiricism. Obviously, both approaches are necessary to forming a proper Christian world view, but they must be balanced. With the eclipse of realism by nominalism in the latter part of the scholastic period, the balance was lost and nominalism ruled in one form or another until late in the twentieth century. Richard Weaver, in his influential work, *Ideas Have Consequences*, explains the effects of that conceptual trajectory:

The issue ultimately involved is whether there is a source of truth higher than, and independent of, man; and the answer to the question is decisive for one's view of the nature and destiny of humankind. The practical result of nominalist philosophy is to banish the reality which is perceived by the intellect and to posit as reality that which is perceived by the senses. With this change in the affirmation of what is real, the whole orientation of culture takes a turn, and we are on the road to modern empiricism.

It is easy to be blind to the significance of a change because it is remote in time and abstract in character. Those who have not discovered that world view is the most important thing about a man, as about the men composing a culture, should consider the train of circumstances which have with perfect logic proceeded from this. The denial of universals carries with it the denial of everything transcending experience. The denial of everything transcending experience means inevitably—though ways are found to hedge on this—the denial of truth. With the denial of objective truth there is no escape from the relativism of “man the measure of all things.”<sup>8</sup>

### Postmodernism

With the arrival of the postmodern era in the final decades of the twentieth century, some of the nominalist categories began to change. The denial of transcendent (objective, absolute) truth became even more pronounced with the claim that all knowledge is subjective and individually interpreted. Thus the rhetoric of perspectivalism, political motivation, and relativism became influential in cultural debates. Faith in the inductive scientific method, however, has waned, through recognition of inherent biases in experimental methodology and choices of experiments, as well as political nuancing of results and discoveries.

In religious contexts, there is a greater concern for an experience with the transcendent in worship and for an increased sense of group identity. At the same time, however, the individual's personal and subjective experiences are more highly valued than ever. Narcissism (obsession with the self) is the common cultural perspective in North America, sometimes leading nearly to solipsism (the view that only personal knowledge is possible). Although reality is commonly perceived as relative and personal, there is a growing belief in miracles and the existence of angels, both of which are transcendent categories. These contradictory perceptions are leading to chaotic world views which cannot sustain a biblical viewpoint. Transcendence and Immanence have become parts of a religious buffet, from which individuals choose favorite delicacies at random. Never has the need for balance been more urgent.

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<sup>8</sup>Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 3-4.

## Pastoral Implications

The pastoral implications of imbalance in transcendence and immanence cannot be overemphasized. As noted above, the doctrinal issues alone are of great concern. Even if the biblical doctrines are properly formulated and defended, however, incoherence in the world views of Christians is hindering the life and mission of local congregations. A few examples will illustrate the problem.

### Loss of Transcendence

#### 1. Theological Loss

- ◆ World View and Ethics. Bible-based theology as essential to a Christian world view is not a priority in the present era. As Weaver correctly noted, if there are no transcendent realities there can be no normative truth which is above the opinions of individuals. Much of the focus of postmodern Christianity is upon solving personal problems and avoiding pain, both physical and emotional. Likewise, in the absence of transcendent principles, there are no ethical standards to which all Christians are subject. Cultural humanism and existential “spirituality” rush into the moral vacuum which results.
- ◆ Trinitarianism. In evangelical circles, all too often the doctrine of Trinity has been a matter of creedal affirmation, but practical indifference.<sup>9</sup> The transcendence of the persons has been lost in the immanence of the Godhead. That the persons of the Trinity are truly persons—unique individuals, with differing personal characteristics—is largely ignored, outside of matters of the incarnation and vicarious death of the Son. If God is the ground of all reality and ultimate source of all knowledge, then the doctrine of the Trinity is of vital importance. In recent years, a few evangelical theologians have begun to ponder and write about the reality that the Trinity is the basis for understanding the nature of community in both the local church and in the Body of Christ. The Trinity is the only perfect expression of unity without uniformity and variety without conflict.

In response to a balanced doctrine of the Trinity, the local church should model great respect for the variety of personalities, gifts, skills, personal histories, and ethnic origins of the congregation. At the same time, these should be brought together in a unity of faith and love. The contribution of each should be the work of the church, but no person’s distinctiveness should be absorbed into other personalities.

- ◆ Eschatology. Particularly noticeable in the loss of transcendence has been a focus away from the believer’s heavenly hope. Happiness is sought in the here and now, not in heaven. The popularity of the *Left Behind* series of books does not contradict this concern. Interest in pop eschatology is more on the order of fascination with

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<sup>9</sup>Orthodox theologians, on the other hand, for centuries have made Trinitarianism the center of theology, even beginning the study of Theology Proper, not with the unity of the Godhead, but with the plurality of the persons. The western church tradition has always been to emphasize the unity before the plurality.

horoscopes. It has more to do with forecasting the future and reading the “signs of the times”, than it does with living holy lives in the hope of the second coming of our Lord. Eschatology which does not shape one’s goals, motives, and world view is not biblical.<sup>10</sup>

In a published interview, J. I. Packer was asked, “As you scan the near future, what theological issues will pastors increasingly face?” Part of his answer speaks to this issue:

We also need to recover a true understanding of human life, a sense of the greatness of the soul. We need to recover the awareness that God is more important than we are, that the future life is more important than this one, that happiness is the promise for heaven, that holiness is the priority here in this world, and that nothing in this world is perfect or complete.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Relational Loss

- ◆ Worship. The loss of an adequate perspective on transcendence has a profound effect upon one’s view of worship. As the viewpoint moves out of balance toward immanence, God becomes a therapeutic tool for the worshipper. Emotion, which is truly very important in worship, may largely displace biblical concepts, which are also very important. Further, there will be a tendency in musical lyrics to emphasize the act of worship over the object of worship. In a narcissistic transformation, worship may become the object of worship. As God becomes less a subject of awe, he becomes more an extension of the will of the worshipper.

Musical choices in corporate worship are difficult to make and a source of much conflict. This is no place to attempt a resolution of the issues involved. Regardless of the types of music used, however, there is probably no more important area in worship for modeling a proper balance between transcendence and immanence. Both the awesome majesty of our absolute Sovereign and the indescribable condescension of his grace and mercy must be expressed in proper proportion. One interesting aspect which may be noticed in many contemporary choruses and not a few traditional gospel songs is the use of the pronoun *I* in the lyrics to the near exclusion of *We*. The result is a loss of the transcendence of one’s fellow-worshippers, as the focus becomes individual worship in the midst of a group. Corporate worship is perhaps the church’s best opportunity to express unity without uniformity and of individuality without individualism.

- ◆ Relationships. In the same way, a loss of the sense of transcendence in relationships changes others into objects to be manipulated, or into perceived extensions of oneself. Contemporary relational conflicts among Christians, whether in marriage, friendships, or the local church, are at least partly rooted in an unwillingness to allow another in the relationship to be the unique person that each is. Instead of finding ways to nurture and promote the strengths and special qualities of others, there is all

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<sup>10</sup>An excellent treatment of this concern is: A. J. Conyers, The Eclipse of Heaven: Rediscovering the Hope of a World Beyond (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup>Kevin Miller and Marshall Shelley, “Children of a Larger God: How Good Theology Expands the Soul. An Interview with J. I. Packer,” Leadership (Summer 1998): 113.

too often an overt effort to change them into personal clones. As a result, if personal happiness is not achieved in the relationship, even Christians may choose to end the relationship for the most trivial of reasons. This is readily observable in marriages, as well as in friendships and congregational relationships. Some of the epidemic of child abuse is certainly a result of viewing a child as a means of self-gratification, rather than as a transcendent human of great worth to be nurtured and encouraged.

### Loss of Immanence

#### 1. Theological Loss

- ◆ Providence. In view of the profound loss of a sense of the transcendent, it is ironic that perhaps no doctrine has been so nearly eclipsed in recent years as that of divine providence. The common speech of believers and unbelievers alike is filled with references to miracles. Any wonderful or amazing event is designated a miracle. Obviously, in many contexts the word is intended only to mean something astounding. The language of Christians, however, reveals that for many, anything which turns out well requires a transcendent act of God—a special intervention in the progress of world events. The shape of prayers and prayer requests seems grounded in the idea of miraculous rescue from every form of suffering, or even inconvenience. Prayer for escape from difficult situations is much more common than prayer for character, courage, steadfastness, and, above all, God’s sustaining grace within the situations.

While the Bible makes it very clear that miracles do occur, the narratives of Scripture make it equally clear that God accomplishes the majority of his purposes by his providential plan. Although this may easily be seen in the Old Testament history in general, books such as Ruth and Esther make it explicit, as does the wisdom literature. God is the God of reversals, choosing the younger over the elder and the weak over the strong. Within a patriarchal Jewish society, he includes Gentiles and women in crucial aspects of his plan. In the short view, there is simply no way to predict the outcomes planned by God for the events of life. It is certain, however, that in the long view, his goals will be accomplished. Faith in this reality is sadly lacking today, resulting in the next area of loss.

- ◆ Contentment. Never has there been more dissatisfaction and bitterness among Christians in North America than today. As western culture has grown accustomed to technology-based conveniences, the idea has arisen that suffering is unacceptable. In this case, the tendency is to think of God as relationally distant, for surely he would take the suffering away if he really cared. Minds shaped by a culture of comfort seem unable to receive the exhortations of Scripture that suffering brings about maturity and wisdom. The God of all comfort, who is relationally immanent, is viewed as cold and uncaring, or else as virtually sadistic in his methods for achieving good ends. “Life sucks” is a common complaint, especially of younger Christians.

## 2. Relational Loss

- ◆ Commitment. Parallel to the loss of a sense of others as transcendently precious, there is also a distortion of immanent intimacy. When the other person in a relationship is not valued in the transcendent sense, that person may easily be viewed as disposable. Thus the true intimacy (immanence) of trust, acceptance, loyalty, and unwavering love is lost as well. People become not subjects for relationship, but objects of temporary utility. Romantic love is displaced by sexual lust and friendships are changed as easily as an overcoat. Local churches may be viewed as religious supermarkets where one shops until a better market is found. Narcissistic self-love makes self-sacrifice look foolish. One result is the large number of dysfunctional relationships in homes, schools, businesses, and churches.
  
- ◆ Community. Even though one of the major concerns of postmodern culture is life in community, the actual experience of far too many is loneliness and a sense of isolation. Undoubtedly, part of this is a product of the digital revolution. Many people spend more time staring at a computer monitor than in face-to-face interaction with other humans. Beyond that, however, is an inability to overcome the hyper-individualism of postmodern western culture. In this sense, the self is transcendent from all other selves and the basis for community is lost. Unity in Christ, the primary concept in a sense of belonging to a community of believers, is swallowed up in a culture which has turned proper individuality into the cult of individualism. Regrettably, much of the talk about community goes no further than talk. A notable part of the cultural problem is the total separation of age-groups, which is begun in schools, copied in churches, and extended into homes. As a result, children have only their peers for models, rather than wise and experienced adults.

In many cases the small-group movement among churches has provided opportunities for forming a sense of communal belonging. Certainly this is a move in the right direction. Unfortunately, in some instances a negative side effect has been to create a primary allegiance to that group and a sense of indifference to the church as a whole.

### Conclusion

These examples illustrate, but do not exhaust, the kinds of issues that result from an imbalance in the concepts of transcendence and immanence. The question, of course, is what to do about such problems. One response would be to try to deal with each area and solve each particular problem one at a time. It is likely, however, that new problems would pop up to replace the old ones. Although some problems do have to be dealt with as they arise, the real solution probably should be sought in the transforming effects of a proper world view. Restoring a biblical perspective on a balanced view of transcendence and immanence is more likely to achieve lasting results. This requires a multifaceted approach, including style and content of preaching, teaching, music, mission, and fellowship. Developing a truly Christian world view in the lives of believers is the greatest challenge of pastoral ministry today, and the topic of this study is central to that world view.

Free. Android. A prayer has the power to potentially change any situation, even the most challenging ones, in miraculous ways. In fact, God may even choose to send angels into our lives to answer our prayers. But how often do our prayers reflect the reality that God may respond to them by performing miracles? Sometimes we pray as if we don't really believe that God will answer us. But major religious texts declare that God often responds powerfully to a prayer that a faithful person prays. After the 7 Day Prayer Miracle, it was almost a suffocating blanket was removed. I can even now feel the breath of God and delve into the secrets of the universe.â€ May R. "I was left destitute by my cheating husband. He left me with my 2 young kids and moved in with his mistress half his age. After going through the 7 Day Prosperity Miracle, cheques suddenly came in the mail. There was sudden mysterious deposits in my bank account. Now, I have more than enough for me and my children to live a good life.â€ Miracle Prayer - How to Ask God for a Miracle. Whitney Hopler Crosswalk.com Contributing Writer. 2012 26 Apr.Â 1. A Miracle Prayer for the Impossible. Father, I come to you today with faith so small I cannot see a way. I want to believe you are able to do more than I ever imagine. I want to walk by faith and not by sight. God, please bring a miracle into my life. I know that you can do the impossible in my life and I am trusting in your promises. Thank you for being a God who sees and hears my every need.