

The Doctrine of God: Introduction (cont.); Classical Proofs for God's Existence

*Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your many, many blessings to Your people and the wonderful things that You bring into our lives. We thank You, Lord, for such a great salvation in Jesus Christ, a Savior who literally went all the way, all the way to the cross, to claim a people for Himself. And we thank You, Lord, that by Your favor, by Your particular choice, You have made each and every one of us Your children. We pray this evening that as we again turn our attention to You, that we would seek to do so faithfully, that we would seek to do so controlled by Your Word and not controlled by our speculations. We pray that You would guide us this evening and that You would be with us, for it is in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

Previously we started to talk about God as the covenant Lord. And we said that God can only be known in the context of the covenant. We only know Him as He binds Himself to His creation, in covenant relationship, and His accommodation of His revelation is a function of that covenant bond. Further, we noted just in passing that we only know ourselves there too, we only know ourselves as we relate to God, and that is where John Calvin began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self are interrelated.

Now we want to pick up the question of how God relates in the covenant. And here we want to deal particularly with two terms: transcendence and immanence. If God is the Lord of all things, then He is separate from those things. In other words, He is not those things. He cannot be confused with that over which He exercises lordship. God is exalted above creation. The traditional theological term here is 'transcendence' and all the word means is that God stands above and God stands apart from creation. Genesis 1:1 tells us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The biblical metaphysic is made up of two realities: God and not God, God and creation. The two cannot be confused. But we also said that God is the Lord within covenant relationship. This means that He is involved with His creation. He is, again to use a rather traditional term, 'immanent.' God is close to His creation.

John Frame is certainly correct when he notes that it has historically been the case that serious problems have attended the concept of transcendence and immanence. And there are two major problems with this. The first one is the notion that these two terms belong to the same conceptual range, that each one is simply either the negation or the flip side of the other. God is transcendent. God is immanent. The second problem is the confusion of what we are going to call the order of being, 'ontology,' and the order of knowing, 'epistemology.' Let me take these two terms here just for a second and try to define them. When we talk about the order of being, we are talking about what is real, or what is true, and the philosophical term here is 'ontology,' the study of being. The order of knowing, or how we know, is 'epistemology.' How do we know what is real? How do we know what is true? We have two different questions: "What is true?" (ontology) and "How do we know what is true?" (epistemology). Those are different questions. What is it, and how do we what it is? These are two different questions, but it has often been the case that questions in one order have been confused and asked in the other order. Well, let us see how this confusion between transcendence and immanence plays out.

Frequently God's transcendence, His ontological otherness (now that I have introduced the word 'ontology,' I am going to use it as an adjective), God's ontological otherness has often been understood as God being so infinitely removed from us, so distant, so wholly other, that He is hidden from us in such a way that we can have no real knowledge of Him, that we can make no truthful statements about Him. In that argument I moved from an ontological statement, "God is other," to an epistemological statement, "Thus we can know nothing about Him." It is very easy to get these terms confused. Someone said that we can confess God's existence, but beyond that we must stand mute. God is so different, so

distant, and so far away, that we cannot know Him. A good example here is a recent book by William Placher, entitled *The Domestication of Transcendence*. Following in the tradition of Karl Barth, Placher argues that “God so transcends all creaturely categories and analogies that our language about Him is at best provocative and approximate, and at worst our language is idolatrous. We may experience some kind of divine-human encounter, but all our attempts to express that encounter, our attempts to doctrinalize from that experience, are merely the creations of a nose of wax, an idol of the human mind.” If you think about that, it must be said that in very practical terms, such a God as confessed by Placher renders us all kind of pious atheists. This God says nothing to us and He can make no demands upon us, and all covenantal relationship is denied. Placher is sort of the poster boy for radical existentialism: God exists, but He is so different, so utterly distant, that we can have no knowledge of Him. God’s ontological otherness entails unknowability.

Let us turn to immanence. Oftentimes the exact other end of the theological spectrum, God’s immanence, is also misunderstood. Immanence is often thought of as asserting that God is indistinguishable from the world, that when God enters our creation, when He enters our world, He becomes so worldly that He cannot be found. God is so equivalent with creation that His activity and person cannot be identified in space and time, for God affects all spaces and all times equally and none in particular. If we associated the first position with existentialism, we might associate this vision, or understanding of immanence, with pantheism, a kind of New Age thought.

Both of these positions, that God is utterly distinct, and that God is utterly indistinct, as extreme as they are, and as different as they are from each other, end in the same place. Both of them reject a revelation in which God is distinguishable and knowable, that you can distinguish God from His creation and know Him. And both of them deny any human obligation to the divine. The radical transcendence of existentialism secularizes all reality, for the divine cannot be found. And the radical immanence of pantheism sacrilizes all reality, for it makes God indistinguishable from the created order. The result of both is a kind of pious atheism or agnosticism. If God is wholly other, then how can we know or say that He is wholly other? If God is to be completely identified with creation, then one of the two of them is redundant. Why not simply speak of creation and leave God out of the matter? If you think about either of these positions, how would one validate any statement about God at all? What I hope you can see is that the language of transcendence and immanence is a bit sticky and it can be confusing. The fact is that both terms can be used in a number of different ways. The term transcendence can be used to refer to either ontological difference or cognitive distance, depending on whether you use it as a statement from the order of being or you use it as a statement qualifying the order of knowing. Likewise, immanence can be used to refer to either ontological association if used ontologically, or moral proximity and personal intimacy if it is used epistemologically.

What we need to know, and I am going to put this forward as simply a presupposition, is that these two terms, transcendence and immanence, are not true complements of one another. Each one of them properly deals in a different realm, so they are not simply two sides of the same coin. I want to suggest that transcendence is properly understood as an ontological qualifier. God is transcendent in that He is different from His creation. He cannot be confused with it. Immanence, properly understood, or employed in terms which agree with Scripture (we have to remember that neither of these terms are biblical terms, so we must use them so that they comport with what Scripture actually says) is not an ontological qualifier. It is rather a term of personal proximity. It is a term of relationship. Immanence speaks of God’s closeness to His creation, but not closeness in composition. It is not like God is made up of the same stuff we are, rather it is the closeness of proximity, time, intention, and relationship. Bringing the two terms together under our discussion that God is the covenantal Lord, we can say that transcendence means God is the head of the covenant. It means His covenant lordship, His covenant

headship. God is the Master of His creation. And immanence refers to His covenant intimacy and involvement.

What I am getting at here is that, even though God cannot be confused with the created order, God is free to enter into the created order. God is free to enter into covenant relationship. Again, these two terms can be used many ways, and they have been used many ways by philosophers. The word 'immanence' is especially plastic in the history of philosophy and theology. What I am suggesting here is a proper, biblically informed understanding of the language. But let us take up a bit more of this issue of the realm of being and the realm of knowing. Again, the realm of being (ontology) asks, what is it, what is the nature of the thing? And the realm of knowing (epistemology) asks, how can this thing be known? These two realms must always be distinguished, but they must never be separated. Declarations regarding transcendence or immanence in the realm of being often come with uncritical assumptions about the realm of knowledge. As an example, go right back to Placher: God is so transcendent that we cannot know. So we make casual assumptions, or statements in one area, and they come with entailments in the other area.

That brings us to covenant lordship and covenant presence. Does God's transcendence over His creation entail agnosticism on our part? No. It should not, but some people will speak of God's transcendence that way; they will try to force that conclusion. God's transcendence in Scripture—now I am thinking in biblical terms, in terms of the story we actually have in front of us in the Bible—does not simply center on ontological distinction. Remember that we can always distinguish between the Creator and creation. It also seems to me that it centers on God's sovereign power and authority over His creation. God's transcendence needs to be understood in covenant relationship. As God relates to the creation God's power and authority, while it exalts Him far above anything creaturely, is never an unknowable power and authority. God exercises His lordship, and He is sovereign over creation as its Creator and its Redeemer, and He is the sovereign sustainer of all things. One of the ways that He exercises His authority is that He upholds His right to be obeyed. Over and over again, the covenant stresses that fact, often in very explicit terms. His servants are to obey Him. What I am getting at here is this: God's power must be experienced. His authority must be known for it to be meaningful. If God does not relate to us in covenant, it really does not make a whole lot of difference how eloquent our statements of His transcendence are. So aside from God's covenant lordship, statements about God's covenant transcendence are irrelevant. I want to appreciate, and even respect, Barth's and Placher's assertions that our statements about God can become idols if we forget that He sovereignly transcends any language that we use about Him. The danger of their position is that God is reduced to a philosophical principle. It seems to me that is even more dangerous, even more problematic, than the other side, than an over-familiarity. In many ways, the covenant calls us to that very familiarity.

As transcendence does not entail unknowability, so immanence does not entail identity, or association. God's immanence may be described as His personal solidarity with His creation. As the sovereign Lord, God creates the world and then immediately He enters into it and walks in it. He personally elects a people and He identifies their mission with His goals. The heart of the covenant relationship which gives meaning to the term immanence is of course the covenant formula which we talked about last time: "I will be your God, you will be My people." God names Himself as Yahweh, the King of Israel, and thus He associates Himself with Israel, but this is a covenantal not an ontological identification. It is a moral identification. Thus God is with them. He is near them. In New Testament terms, He becomes 'Emmanuel,' God with us, but He is not us. Neither of these terms, transcendence or immanence, despite the kind of philosophical context I have put them into, should be thought of as vague, abstract principles. They rather are both very deeply personal and practical. The fact that God is transcendent, different from us, means that He is namable. To call Him the universe is to confuse Him with that which is His

product. The fact that God is different from us and we know that difference by His revelation means that we can know the name He gives Himself. The fact that God is immanent means that we can have personal relationship with Him. God comes to us as the covenant Lord and He invites us into relationship. But God's transcendence and immanence, not general ideas of them, but His real transcendence and immanence, are fundamental, covenantal realities of Scripture. Both are necessary to understanding that He is the living and true God, the one God who is opposed to the deaf and dumb idols that we make up.

That brings our discussion of covenant lordship to a conclusion, except for some questions. Has the historical discussion between philosophy and biblical religion brought clarity or has it merely confused the issue? At the threat of getting ahead of myself, but we are heading in that direction anyway, I think it has confused the issue. In the final analysis I am going to suggest that philosophy gets in the way far more often than it helps. If it really helped, then God goofed when he couched his Word in the terms that He did. If I really need to take a course in philosophy in order to understand the Bible, then what God really should have done instead of giving me the stories that He has, is He should have given me a series of lectures in philosophy. But what we see in Scripture is more than kernels of truth; it is a truth that is embodied. What we see is truth put into historical, covenantal, often creaturely contexts so that we can understand it. And what has happened is that we have sought to universalize it. We have sought to abstract it. We have sought to get rid of the historical realities because we thought they were not important. And we actually lost something of substance. What I am going to end up arguing is that if we paid more attention to the way Scripture talks about God, we would be a long way ahead. I argue that most of our talk about God, while it may not be unbiblical, it is extra-biblical. It is in categories, it is in terms, it is in stories that we do not find in the biblical materials. I would like you to get some sense of just how dogmatic some of these issues have become, so much that we cannot see the biblical materials for what they actually are.

Classical proofs for God's existence will be our next topic. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who reigned as emperor reigned from 150-151AD, was a staunch persecutor of the church. But even though Aurelius persecuted Christians, he was no unthinking brute. In fact, he was a very educated man, and he was a devotee, a follower, of Stoic philosophy. As such, he was a rationalist. He was opposed to Christianity because he was convinced that it was a stubbornly irrational religion. Christians' claims of supernatural miracles, of a divinely inspired book, of the messiahship of an unlettered Palestinian carpenter, are all contrary to reason and common sense. And their claim that their sect, of all the beliefs in the world, is true, that only it is true, that only they truthfully represent the character of God and His ways, makes them narrow-minded, irrational bigots. Marcus Aurelius would typify the early Christians as a rabble of illiterate bumpkins and thus it was easy to persecute this band of unsophisticated, superstitious people. They worshipped an unlettered, untraveled Jew as God come in the flesh. And they concerned themselves with a bunch of silly stories about a God who enters into creation and into history to save them. But beginning already at the end of the second century, the same century as Marcus Aurelius, Christian theologians began to defend the Christian religion against these kinds of charges.

The men who took on this task were called 'apologists'; to give an apology is to make a defense. It is not to say, "I am sorry." The classical term 'apology' means to "make a defense." The apologists were particularly concerned to show that Christianity is a reasonable religion. One can be within one's intellectual rights and still be a Christian. With that in view, such people as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria sought to present Christianity as the highest and purest philosophy. To do that, they gave special attention to the conclusions of Greek natural theology, or what could be called natural religion. I think I have used both terms somewhat interchangeably. And they argued that Christianity is not the enemy, but rather the fulfillment of philosophy. Justin argued that Christianity is fundamentally a

philosophical religion. The truths of the Christian religion are philosophical truths. That means its truths are universal. They are not tied to any particular time or place or story. The particulars that are there are merely their pedagogical tools, and they actually mediate universal philosophical concepts. Justin Martyr further argued that before Christ's coming in the flesh, God had inspired the philosophers of ancient Greece. Such thinkers as Plato and Philo had a right understanding of God's nature and were in a sense Christians before Christianity because they lived by right reason.

This history suggests that we need to say something about the Greek philosophical method for thinking about God. The Greek philosophical method for doing theology or thinking about God worked by way of analogy. God can be known by reflecting on the human being and then extrapolating reflection out into what would be appropriate for a divine being. There are two primary methods for the Greek use of analogy.

First is the way of eminence or supererogation. In that method, we are looking at a human being and thinking there is an analogue between us and God. So we look at human potential, human powers, and human capacities and we see that we have some good potential. For instance, power—if some power is good, more power is better, and all power is best. So if we have potency, then God must have all potency. God is omnipotent. We have intelligence, and some of us have more intelligence and that is good. God must have all intelligence. He must know all things. Thus God is omniscient. We have presence. We have extension. We fill space and that is good. God must fill all space, so God is omnipresent. So we have a human capacity that we think is good and we expand it to infinity. That is the principle of supererogation or eminence.

The other principle that they used was called the *via negativa*. This term has been used in other contexts in the history of theology. But one way it is used is again looking at human beings, and we also know that human beings have some less desirable qualities. They are bad. They are less than good. For example, human beings change. I was not always bald. I had hair once. But we are mutable and we change. God does not change, so God is immutable. We negate that undesirable property. Human beings are passionate. Our feelings change, and the Greek term for that is 'passable,' and thus the Greeks said God was impassable. He is not bound by passing emotional states. We are temporal, bound by time, and our sense is that is bad, so we negate that and we say that God is eternal. We are finite. God is infinite. So by looking at a person and thinking of an analogy between a human being and God, we expand the positive attributes into infinity and we negate negative attributes, and what we come up with is a collection of attributive statements. This can be called the process of natural theology or natural religion. The point of Greek natural theology was the proposition that God's character, even His essence, can be known by human rational process, and we just kind of demonstrated it. Whatever we need to know about God we can know through rational means.

Beginning with the apologists, Greek philosophy and biblical religion about God were synthesized into a single, syncretistic conception of God. Let me explain the word 'syncretism.' Syncretism is the bringing of two opposing principles, methods, or systems together in such a way that the product is neither purely one nor the other. I am going to suggest that the apologists syncretized Greek philosophy with biblical religion, and what they ended up with was neither quite Greek philosophy nor biblical religion. It was a hybrid. The content of the biblical revelation was accommodated to a Greek rationalist worldview and a philosophical methodology. When you ask people to this day how they will go about studying God, they will often tell you, "I am going to look at the divine attributes." What they do not realize is that they are simply recapitulating the processes and the thought forms of pagan philosophy.

Again, the definition of syncretism is the bringing of two opposing principles together so that the product is neither one nor the other. It is a hybrid. It is common today to refer to the product of this long tradition of interchange of Christian thought and Greek philosophies as ‘classical theism.’ I am not going to try to define that term. I think that as I talk you will get a sense for the term. The vast majority of Christian theology since the early church has seen the doctrine of God through the vocabulary and through the methods of Greek philosophical reflections. What this means is that the conception of God that most Western people have, whether Christian or not, and thus the deity they actually worship or think of as God, is as much the product of a philosophical system that is extra-biblical as it is the product of biblical reflection. That is hitting on the issue of syncretism. Bray tells the story of second and third century syncretism, the relationship between the biblical faith and Greek philosophical insight, as the history of mutual accommodation. Things such as Platonism, Stoicism, and Aristotelianism influenced the way that Christians thought about God. But Bray contends that the reverse is also true. Christian commitments either altered these philosophical methods or they functioned as the pallbearers at their funerals. It is not our concern here to either agree or disagree with Bray’s analysis, but merely to witness along with him, that the product of the long interchange between Christian thinking about God and philosophical thinking about God is something we might call classical theism.

Let us then look at the characteristics of classical theism. This will help to start give more definition to the term as well. Thomas Aquinas, the medieval Roman Catholic theologian, taught at the University of Paris, and he is usually thought of as the kind of poster boy for classical theism. In other words, he gives it its most highly developed articulation. He does more with the notion of bringing together Christian thought and philosophical thought than anyone else, certainly until recent philosophical history. The first characteristic is ontological correspondence. What we mean by this is that the divine corresponds in some fundamental way with the creaturely or phenomenal. In other words, there is an analogy between the creature and the Creator. I am going to say more about this as we proceed, but I think that is enough at this point.

The next characteristic is knowability, or what I call epistemological correspondence. This correspondence, this epistemological correspondence, between the divine and the phenomenal implies that God can be known by an analogical analysis of the phenomenal world. God can be known by looking at the world. These analogues can even be spoken of as proofs of the divine. By an examination of the creaturely realm, one is led to God and God in some way corresponds to our world. According to Aquinas, the fact that God created the world, points to a fundamental analogy of being, or the *analogia entis*, between God and the world. There is not only an epistemological correspondence, but an ontological continuity between them. Let me explain this. Think of a ladder. At the top of the ladder is pure spirit. God is the source of all being, all other beings other than God are derived beings, and they are derived from His being. This is the classic Greek notion here. A little bit lower than God, we have angels. A little bit lower than angels, we start adding some matter, so we start adding some bodies and we have humans. Actually, to be really faithful to the Greeks, we have to say we have men, and below that we have women, but we will not explore that. Below humans, we have different kinds of animals, whatever your favorite animal is I guess would be up here—guinea pigs, and then on down the line. Down at the bottom we have base matter. Sometimes it is called the great chain of being—you can think of this as links in a chain, rather than rungs on a ladder. So basically the idea is that we can know what God is like, because we are made up of the same fundamental stuff. We are simply more matter and less spirit. And you can see how using all this stuff, the order of being and the order of knowing, got confused. It just got all mish-mashed together. The created order is an ontological extension of the divine; that is the way medieval philosophy and theology looked at it. God is the source or the locus of all being. Phenomenal reality is derived beings, derived from God, and thus derived from His being.

While classical theism did much, perhaps too much, with this notion of analogy, especially as it blends into ontological issues, it must also be noted that classical theism did not deny a real distinction between the divine and the creaturely. They did want to say that God is fundamentally independent from His works, from His creation. To say “God” is not simply to voice a synonym for world or man. They did want to hold onto an analogy, an ontological analogy that gave them an epistemological correspondence, but they also wanted to hold onto a distinction. What this means for the idea of an analogy is that the difference is as important as the correspondence between the divine and the creaturely. This means that the correspondence found in the analogy of being is a real correspondence. It implies two magnitudes, not one. With correspondence you need two—likeness is not sameness. That is probably the best way to state that briefly.

Some folks would forget the issue of distinction. I am just going to quickly mention these. The mystical tradition would take the idea of continuity to the extreme. They would take it so far that they would approach real pantheism. If it was thought of cosmically, then God simply absorbs all things. If it was thought of more anthropocentrically, or more in terms of us, of man (this is probably more of the Eastern tradition), you end up with a notion of man’s deification. If man is God, then man can become divinized.

God’s acts are what God is. That can be articulated in many ways. When nature precedes function, it is always under threat of being marginalized. This distinction arose in medieval theology, however problematic for our appreciation of history. If God is the great Creator, if He is the ultimate Maker of all things, then His own person, His own nature cannot be open to being relativized by what He makes. God’s nature does precede, come before, His actions. God must be fundamentally independent of all contingent reality. In other words, Christians did not just fall for a philosophical trick when they made the distinction between nature and acts, but we are going to see that problems do arise here.

We are going to start to see the problems in the distinction between the divine nature and works. As Bray puts it, the issues of the divine nature ask the question, what is God like? Or simply, what is God? It is a definition question. On the other hand, God’s works and His relationships are separate from that question. When we ask questions about God’s works and relationships, we are not asking, what is God? Rather we are asking, who is God? That is the way Bray puts it. Classical theism held that the question of nature is prior to the question of relationship. Furthermore, and here is where the problem really begins, nature deals with what is essential or necessary, that which is necessarily true about God. While relationship, works, acts, and those sorts of things are ‘accidental’ in the philosophical sense. Here is the point: if God is independent of His works, then His historical relationships are accidental. They are not necessary to who He is. They are not necessary to His being. Thus it is not essential that we study or attend to the creative acts—to the Exodus, to the election of Israel, to the wilderness wanderings, to the incarnation, to the crucifixion, or even to the resurrection—in order to know the fundamental nature of God. As a matter of fact, according to the process of this tradition, God would be no less God if He chose not to engage in any of those events and relationships. That is why they are accidental. An accidental property does not have to take place and you would still have what is still there. God can be known without reference to them.

Notice that by making this move, we have bracketed out all of God’s historical relating. We are engaged purely in what is often called natural theology or natural religion. For our purposes here, we do not need to define natural theology as anything more than this: reflection about God which is done without recourse to particular revelation, without recourse to God’s self-disclosure in history, Jesus, or Scripture. When we do natural theology, we are speaking about God without reference to covenantal realities, and thus we are seeking to speak about God as He is in and of Himself.