

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you
Issue #34

May/June, 1996

The Promise of God's Presence

The Lure of Paganism part 3

by Bob DeWaay

“And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.” (1Peter 1:8)

“He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.” (1Timothy 6:15b,16)

“But He said, ‘You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!’” (Exodus 33:20)

Can we trust our destiny to a God we cannot see? Biblical faith says we must. Paganism can be attractive because humans find it difficult to trust and hope while faith has not yet become sight. Biblically, our comfort and hope is that God promises to be with those with whom He has entered a covenant relationship.

The first chapters of Genesis speak of God's intimate fellowship with humans — fellowship soon compromised by their sin. The immediate results of human rebellion is revealing: *“They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8)*. They had sought autonomous knowledge (**Genesis 3:5**) and instead they became alienated from

the true knowledge of God. They lost their intimate fellowship with God and now His presence threatened them.

The final book of the Bible describes this situation reversed, the results of God's gracious salvation:

There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. and there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:3-5)

Intimate fellowship with God is the beginning and ending of the Biblical record. In between is the dramatic and tragic story of humans who sense that they need far more than what they have and turn to the creation for what only the Creator can provide. Integrated with this tragic account is the history of God revealing Himself and redeeming fallen people. The battle of the ages is a battle of faith: can we hope and trust in an unseen God?

True Transcendence

The dilemma of the faith is that humans have lost fellowship with the true God but seek escape from their lost condition in futile ways. In seeking forbidden knowledge Adam and Eve were thrust away from the true knowledge of God. People need God but want everything else and vainly search the created order for a substitute for God.

In theology we speak of “transcendence.” This concerns what is beyond or of a greater order of being than what is human. Humans need to experience something beyond themselves, the transcendent. This idea includes the

extraordinary contrasted to the mundane, the sacred to the profane, or the universal to the particular. The Bible, however, claims that God is uniquely holy, glorious, and exalted above all else (see **1Timothy 6:15,16** quoted above). This makes transcendence truly profound and hopeful. It means that there really **is** something or someone beyond the limits of the created universe and even of human imagination. God is absolutely, *“holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens”* (as Jesus is described as our high priest in **Hebrews 7:6**). Biblical transcendence means that truly there is hope to transcend the sorrows and misery of fallen human existence. This hope is in the presence of God Himself, who is the proper object of our faith and desire.

Pagan idolatry worships something created in the place of the truly transcendent God. This is illustrated by the ironic account of God's glorious visitation of the people of Israel and their creation of the golden calf. These people knew well God's glorious, transcendent nature. In the account of the ten commandments given in **Deuteronomy 5**, Moses reminded them of this:

You said, “Behold, the Lord our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives. Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, then we will die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? Go near and hear all that the Lord our God says; then speak to us all that the Lord our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do it.” (Deuteronomy 5:24-27)

Because they feared dying in God's presence, the Israelites asked Moses to go up and receive God's words. Ironically, it was Moses' extended absence

that led to idolatry: “Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, ‘Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him’” (**Exodus 32:1**). The Israelites wanted a god they could see! Their new “god,” however, had no moral guidance to offer. Because, idols are neither holy nor transcendent; their appeal is that they can be seen and controlled. Also, if people tire of their manufactured or dreamed up “gods” they can get rid of them and make others.

The battle of faith is that we cannot see God but to know Him we must depend on His self-revelation through Scriptures and the inner work of the Holy Spirit. This self-revelation, however, has moral content. Available and clamoring for attention are visible or

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ed “gods” who offer minimal moral guidance. They are not truly transcendent but provide a false **sense** of transcendence by creating an extra-personal or religious experience. This can be temporarily intoxicating, and some intoxication can be an idolatrous substitute for the experience of God’s presence. Paul admonishes: “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit” (**Ephesians 5:18**). When Jesus’ disciples were alarmed and fearful at the prospect of not having Him bodily with them He promised, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you” (**John 14:16,17**).

The various sensual, intoxicating experiences that lure people into idolatry should be seen for what they are — substitutes for the presence of God. Sin deceives us. We think that our desire for transcendence can be met one temporary, fleeting experience at a time. A “high” here and a party there, with mystical religious experiences thrown in to add spirituality to the mix and people think they have escaped the mundane and the ordinary. But counterfeit transcendence is rather ordinary — the product of this fallen creation and destined to perish. This world cannot offer the joy described by the psalmist: “You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (**Psalms 16:11**). Paganism offers no forever other than the prospect of eternal punishment, an outcome steadfastly denied by those who doubt the Bible.

A Lesson from the Golden Calf

We must keep the issue of God’s holy, transcendent nature clear in our minds if we are to avoid the errors of

the eyewitnesses to God’s power. They saw God deliver them from Egypt and feed them with manna from heaven and were well aware of God’s holiness and glory. “Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt’” (**Exodus 32:3,4**). How absurd to claim that something they knew to be created from their own jewelry had brought them out of Egyptian slavery! Surely modern people do not make such outlandish statements — or do they? Is it anymore absurd to claim that human rationality came from an impersonal process of random collisions of molecules? Once people reject God’s revelation, absurdities have no trouble

gaining credence.

The fundamental problem is not intellectual but moral and spiritual. Given human sinfulness, do we want to trust an unseen God who is truly almighty, holy, and righteous? Golden calves are not a threat to judge us. They are not like Book of Hebrews describes God: “Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire” (**Hebrews 12:28,29**). The people went from being afraid of dying in the presence of a holy God to forgetting who He is once Moses was out of sight for a while. The golden calf did not invoke the same fear and awe that God did.

“Out of sight, out of mind” describes the relationship many people have with God. Not that it is so offensive intellectually to believe that an almighty, eternal Creator was the cause of the universe; rather it is more convenient to worship the creation (see **Romans 1:18-24**). Looking at the created universe many are in effect saying, “this is your god who brought you into being.” Like the golden calf of old, this “god” is strangely permissive about morals and similarly the people are “out of control” (see **Exodus 32:25**).

Idolatry is as tragic as it is ironic. **Isaiah 44** uses irony to shame idolaters into seeing the absurdity of their ways.

*Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel And his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me. Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; yes, let him recount it to Me in order, from the time that I established the ancient nation. And let them declare to them the things that are coming and the events that are going to take place. (**Isaiah 44:6,7**)*

No answer came nor has it to this day. Things created to not have the attributes of God and cannot accurately predict the future like Biblical prophecy can. God alone is the proper object

of worship, trust and hope. Does this mean that He **is** trusted and believed? Isaiah goes on to tell of a man who cuts down a tree and works the wood, part of it for a fire, part for an ornament for his house, and part to make into a god. The text says, *“But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image. He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god’”* (**Isaiah 44:17**).

Idolatry and the Judgment of Hardening

There is no God but one, the God of the Bible; but people will worship anything else, even a piece of a tree (or the whole tree or the whole forest). There is no evidence or hope that this piece of the creation can deliver another part of the creation (us) nor speak to us about the future. If this is not obvious, why not? **Isaiah 44** continues,

They do not know, nor do they understand, for He has smeared over their eyes so that they cannot see and their hearts so that they cannot comprehend. No one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, “I have burned half of it in the fire and also have baked bread over its coals. I roast meat and eat it. Then I make the rest of it into an abomination, I fall down before a block of wood!” He feeds on ashes; a deceived heart has turned him aside. And he cannot deliver himself, nor say, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?” (**Isaiah 44:18-20**)

Paganism is as self-deluding as it is tragically ironic. Isaiah refers to the fearful judgment of hardening. This means that because of continued, willful denial of God’s truth God gives a person over to his or her own devices.

Paul describes this judgement of hardening (sometimes called “reprobation”) in **Romans 1:28** — *“And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper.”* The irony that

is clear in the Greek does not come out well in this English translation. “They did not see fit” (Greek *edokimasav* = “did not approve of” or rejected after trial¹) so God gave them up to a depraved (Greek *adokimon* = “disapproved” or rejected) mind. They rejected God so God gave them over to a rejected mind. He let them continue in their obvious delusion and its horrible consequences. The fear of this judgment should be a most compelling reason to love the truth (see also **2Thessalonians 2:10-12**). This explains in part why such obvious absurdities as those I quoted in the last issue (like “We are the earth thinking about itself”) are being believed by people who profess to be quite sober minded. Like Aaron’s excuse, *“So they gave it [the gold] to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf”* (**Exodus 32:24**) — the golden calf of idolatry makes us say dumb things.

Can A Transcendent God be With His People?

Some have argued that the transcendence of God means that He is so “other” that we cannot really know Him. The pagan gods do not have this problem, you can set one on your mantle if you so desire. Can we maintain our belief in the eternal attributes of the God of the Bible and still claim that God can be known?

This, theologically, is the issue of immanence and transcendence. We have described God as transcendent — beyond and above us. These descriptors normally are applied to geographical or spacial matters, but not in this case. God’s omnipresence means there is no place where He is not (see **Psalms 139:7**). God’s eternal nature, moral attributes, and personal attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence tell us that God is higher than us in all ways. He is of a greater order of being than all else, including humans.

The opposite of transcendence is immanence — God’s closeness and activity within His creation. Is God high and lifted up and exalted beyond the heavens; or is He a God close at

hand who is very near to us and involved in the world. The Biblical answer is “yes” to both. Is this a logical contradiction or a meaningful expression of who God is? I believe that God is both highly exalted beyond all else and at the same time very near and present.

This passage in Isaiah can help us understand how God is both transcendent and immanent: *“For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite’”* (**Isaiah 57:15**). God’s nature is described as holy, exalted, and eternal — aspects of His transcendence. However, He is close to those who are lowly and contrite. The obvious contrast between “high” and “lowly” helps us understand how God can be both transcendent and immanent. He is transcendent in his being (ontologically) and is immanent in his loving concern for people (relationally).

It is incorrect to over-emphasize either one of these truths at the expense of the other. For example, some theologians so emphasize the idea that God is radically and infinitely “other” that they have declared all language about God meaningless. Others with a similar over-emphasis on transcendence have supposed that believing in God is a matter of “blind faith,” a leap into the dark. They say that God is so infinitely beyond us that objective knowledge is impossible. If transcendence is divorced from the Biblical truth of God’s loving and meaningful intervention in human life and taken to a far enough extreme, one ends up with agnosticism — we do not know if there is a God.

Immanence likewise is often over-emphasized. This is a huge problem in the paganism (the subject of the last two CIC issues). Pagans worship gods who are made with human hands and/or imagined to be laden with human flaws and inferior motives. Pagan gods are fickle and suffer under the very problems we need to solve. Extreme immanence-only theology results

in pantheism — the belief that everything is god. Others who do not go that far say that God cannot solve the problem of evil because He is not all powerful or all knowing. The trend in modern thinking is toward immanence. Many lack understanding of God's majesty, uniqueness, unlimited power, and providential oversight of human affairs.

The Bible clearly does not see God as some impersonal force somehow guiding the process of evolution. Consider **Isaiah 40:13-15**:

Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, Or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge And informed Him of the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust.

Yet just previous to this the prophet spoke of God's loving care for His people, "*Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs And carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes*" (**Isaiah 40:11**).

The answer to the supposed dilemma between transcendence and immanence is God's loving condescension. This is described throughout the Bible and has its greatest expression in the Incarnation. God, though infinitely holy and majestic, eternally existing in completeness, needing nothing, chose to create humans in His image and fellowship with them. God is able to make Himself known to us in spite of our many limitations. It is not that we are able with our own resources to somehow explore the depths of God's being and therefore claim to know Him. We can know God because He has chosen to make Himself known.

God's self-revelation finds its greatest expression in the person of Jesus the Messiah. The writer of Hebrews describes this:

God, after He spoke long ago to

the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

The transcendent Creator came into His creation. He spoke to us and died for our sins. He overcame death through His resurrection and sits exalted on high in the place of foremost power and authority. The Bible asserts throughout that God is both highly exalted and willing to condescend to make Himself known to finite humans.

God Himself as the Object of Our Affections

When God revealed Himself to the Biblical writers and patriarchs He did so as one who came to enter into a loving relationship with them. The terminology used often draws upon the analogy of a marriage ceremony. In the New Testament the church is called the Bride of Christ. The Old Testament uses similar terminology to describe God's entering into a covenant relationship with Israel. For example, "*For as a young man marries a virgin, so your sons will marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you*" (**Isaiah 62:5**). The theme expressed in the promises, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell in your midst" became for Israel the central expression of their covenant relationship with God.

The promise of God's presence in a loving relationship is the most important of the promises. This can be seen by the touching words of Moses to God when Israel's sin had nearly jeopardized their access to God and His promises:

"Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight,

let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider too, that this nation is Your people." And He said, "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest." Then he said to Him, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here." (Exodus 33:13-15)

What provoked this dialogue was God's threat not to go with them, "*Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, and I might destroy you on the way*" (**Exodus 33:3**). Moses did not want the promised land if it meant not having God's presence.

I wonder if this same desire for God is as real and immediate as it should be for us. Certainly God has works and ministries for us to do. However, what we do and how other people view our progress is insignificant compared to the joy of knowing God. The promised land was God's idea, but Moses was wise enough to recognize that the fertile land was not worth inhabiting if God was not present.

Conclusion

The greatest promise in the Bible is that of an eternal relationship with God Himself. However, now we do not see Him with our physical senses. We do not see heaven, nor the glorious city of which the Lamb will be the light, yet we believe. The presence of God, relationally — us as His people, He as our God — is the essence of our life, hope and joy. The pagan temptation is to **not wait** for the day when we shall see Him as He is (**1John 3:2**) but find some temporal god that seems more real and immediately gratifying. If we really believe, we will gladly live with the "down payment" of the indwelling Holy Spirit (**2Corinthians 5:5**) and follow the example of Moses' faith: "*Choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin*" (**Hebrews 11:25**).

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End Notes

1. see A.T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1931) Vol 4; 331.

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