

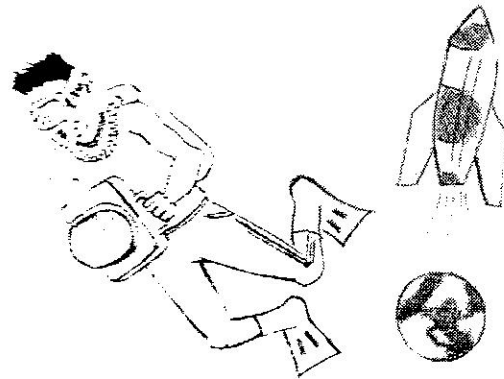
The God Beyond Location

by Dean Merrill¹

Because we human beings are anchored in a specific place every moment of our lives, it is only natural for us to think within that boundary. Each of us has a location, an address—a set of GPS coordinates, if you will. Since the Global Positioning System came into popular use in the past ten years, we can pinpoint our current place on Planet Earth with more precision than ever before.

My house here in America (in case you are interested) is located at Latitude 38.937347, Longitude – (minus) 104.846499. With those two numbers, Google Maps can find me instantly. You can even click on “Satellite View” and peer down onto my rooftop or see the trees in my back yard. Of course, if I were to travel to Central India Theological Seminary in Itarsi (the home of this publication), I could then be found at Latitude 22.615477, Longitude 77.756.982. Such is our reality, the limits of our existence. Is it any wonder, then, that many people struggle to think of God as boundary-less? They may nod their heads at the theological construct called *omnipresence*, but the whole notion is counter-intuitive. God has to be “someplace,” doesn’t he? Alongside the *who* must surely be a *where*.

¹ Dean Merrill is the author of eight books and the co-author of 30 others, including such best sellers as *Fresh Wind*, *Fresh Fire* by Brooklyn Pastor Jim Cymbala and *In the Presence of My Enemies* by Philippine missionary survivor Gracia Burnham.



God of the Hills?

The Old Testament shows multiple signs of this mindset. After all, every other deity could be mapped. Dagon, the Philistine god, lived in his temple at Ashdod (see 1 Sam. 5). Baal, the fertility god of the Canaanites, apparently had multiple residences. “The gods of individual localities had appropriate surnames, e.g., Baal-peor (Num. 25:3).... The incident on Mount Carmel was the outstanding battle between [Yahweh and] the particular Baal favoured by Ahab [which] was Melqart, the seat of whose worship was at Tyre, Jezebel’s home.”²

The surrounding peoples assumed that because Yahweh’s temple and sacred chest (the Ark of the Covenant) were at Jerusalem (elevation 750 meters, or nearly half a mile above sea level), he must be partial to mountainous terrain. A prophet explained to one Israelite king facing a tough battle with his neighbors, “This is what the LORD says: ‘Because the Arameans think the LORD is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the LORD’” (1 Kings. 20:28).³

² “Baal,” *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 115

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version, copyright © 2010. This updated

Even the Israelite clergy themselves got confused at times. Jeremiah 23 scolds the prophets who tended to shortchange the omnipresence of God: “Am I only a God nearby,’ declares the LORD, ‘and not a God far away? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD” (vv. 23-24).

The Man from Nazareth

Then came Jesus, the Son of God. He was amazing. He was all-knowing. He worked miracles nobody else could do. He enjoyed a direct line of communication with his Father. People gradually came to realize that he was, in fact, their long-awaited Messiah.

But there was one attribute he was *not* omnipresent. Jesus in these years always had a location. His home town was Nazareth (in GPS terms, approximately Latitude 32.6775, Longitude 35.3069!). While still a young child, his parents had taken him once as far southwest as Egypt. Otherwise he traveled no more than 120 kilometers from his Galilean base. People at times urgently wanted him to come to where they were (Martha and Mary, for example—John 11), and he was somewhere else. The fleshly body he had agreed to use while on earth could only be in one place at one time.

This made him very real to human eyes—if you were close enough to see him. If you lived, however, in Ephesus or Alexandria or Athens or Rome, you were out of luck. You would have to wait for years, maybe decades, for someone to come tell you about the Savior who once walked through Palestine proclaiming the kingdom of God. If you didn’t know much about Palestine, or held a prejudice against people from that part of the

text is now replacing earlier editions (1984 as well as the TNIV of 2005).

world, you would have to overcome your mental hurdle before being able to appreciate the gospel.

Jesus, it seems, had this limitation in mind when he said to his disciples, “Now I am going to him who sent me. None of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things. But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away” (John 16:5-7). He then proceeded to teach about the coming Holy Spirit and all that he would accomplish. Some six weeks later, Jesus ascended into heaven as they watched from the hillside. He faded from their sight ... and regained omnipresence. He was once again as he had been from the beginning, the Lord of the entire universe, with instant access to every corner of his domain.

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The Unrestricted Spirit

Meanwhile, what about his replacement here on earth?

Only in thinking about the Holy Spirit do we fully grasp the idea of a God who is everywhere at once—a God for the whole world and its many cultures. He is just as present in Africa as in Asia, in North America as in Australia. He is not limited by space or travel constraints. He is a *spirit*.

Please understand that I do not mean to imply in any way that God the Father or God the Son are restricted today. They are not. They are as omnipresent as the Holy Spirit; the Godhead is one. I am only commenting on the fact that *our human perceptions*, especially as anchored in the Old Testament and the

narrative of Jesus on earth, can tend to skew off the path toward local-ness. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is free from such erroneous imagery.

In Portugal there is a large commercial banking firm called BES—Banco Espirito Santo (“Bank of the Holy Spirit”). Headquartered in Lisbon, it has branches in various Portuguese-speaking societies around the world—Brazil, Angola, the Azores. It employs more than 9,000 people and holds assets worth some 82 billion euros.

The name, I am told, comes not from any Christian theology but rather from the surname of the founding family back in 1920. Whatever the origin, let me assure you that the true Holy Spirit of God has a wider reach with greater influence than BES! His “agents” are on all continents. His power is unlimited. His presence is everywhere.

The wind of the Holy Spirit is essential to widespread evangelism in our time.

He is indeed the essence of his name: a *spirit*, which is something nearly all cultures understand (except for those ultra-materialists in Western nations such as my own, who have talked themselves into denying anything beyond the physical senses). Ask any tribesman in Papua New Guinea or the Amazon rain forest about *spirits*, and you will get an outpouring of anecdotes. All over the world, the vast majority of people recognize the unseen dimension. And all stand in need of the gentle influence of the *Holy Spirit* of God.

The Bible calls him “the Spirit of truth” (1 John 4:6), “the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29), and “the Spirit of holiness” (Rom. 1:4) as well as “the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might” (Isa. 11:2). Even King

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, with his limited understanding, recognized something in Daniel he kept calling “the spirit of the holy gods” (Dan. 4:8, 9, 18). Every mention here is universal in nature; there’s nothing parochial or geographical. We know that every person in every culture stands in need of truth, grace, wisdom and these other qualities.

Spirit on the Move

A further insight comes to the surface when we examine the original words for *spirit* in Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*, from which we derive our English “pneumatic” and “pneumonia”). Both root words can be translated “spirit” or “breath” or “wind.” Thus, when the *ruach* of God hovered over the primordial waters in Genesis 1:1, was it the *wind* of God or the *Spirit* of God? Answer: Yes! Both are true. When the *ruach* of God swept into Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37), was it a *breath* or the *Holy Spirit* that brought life and vitality to dead skeleton pieces? There’s no need to differentiate between the two.

Jesus told Nicodemus, “The *pneuma* blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). What a rich metaphor for the work of the Spirit! He is the Divine Wind blowing fresh air into our stale souls. We cannot control him; we cannot predict him; we can only open our windows and let him in.

No wonder that on the Day of Pentecost, as the 120 disciples waited in the Upper Room, “a sound like the blowing of a violent wind (Greek: *pneo*, a cognate of *pneuma*) came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting” (Acts 2:2). The Holy Spirit was invading, and his people would never be the same. Within minutes, a multicultural crowd (at least 15 ethnic groups are mentioned)

gathered out on the street to find out what was going on.

The wind of the Holy Spirit is essential to widespread evangelism in our time as well. The Spirit has no limitation of passport or language. He moves wherever he sees fit. If the gospel is going to penetrate the far-flung continents of our globe, we must have the Holy Spirit's wind-thrust at our backs. Whether in Bangalore, Berlin, Boston, Buenos Aires, or Baghdad, the power of the Holy Spirit is the key to blowing down walls of skepticism, traditionalism, and fear.

The Spirit is not geo-bound. No one can accuse him of being nationalistic. He has no preferred locale. He is fully omnipresent.

Empowered

One of the most effective cross-cultural evangelists of the previous century was a Spirit-empowered man named E. Stanley Jones. In 1907 the Methodist Church sent him—an unmarried 23-year-old fresh out of college—to pastor the English-speaking church in Lucknow. But it quickly became clear that he was meant for larger things. He possessed an unusual ability to read the larger culture, to see what was happening in India in those colonial days, and so his stance was, in essence, "I am not here to defend British rule; I am not here to defend Western Christianity; I am not here to defend the Methodist Church. All I came to do is to talk about Christ." And Hindus as well as Muslims nodded their willingness to listen.

His sphere of influence grew rapidly. In Delhi in 1919, a crowd of some 1,500 attended his meetings night after night. The atmosphere was "electric with interest," Jones reported in a letter to donors.

On the last night I presented the Cross of Christ to the non-Christians and in the closing appeal spoke to them upon my knees. God's

Spirit mightily worked. All day long between meetings there was a stream of non-Christians wanting to have personal talks with me. Many signed cards that they would study the Bible with an open mind and prayerful heart.⁴

In religiously fervent Godhra, which had never had a city-wide Christian event,

...the meetings were held in the enclosed compound of a Hindu temple in which chairs, benches, and carpets were placed. The most prominent Hindu of the city presided at the meetings, and Hindu ushers showed the people to their seats.⁵

Conventions in such southern places as Travancore drew from 25,000 to 30,000 attenders. "When I gave the invitation for those who would surrender to Christ to arise, they began to rise by the thousands, and there they stood in the presence of God while His power shook them."⁶

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Jones ended up speaking an estimated 60,000 times during his long life—possibly a world record. People gave their lives to Christ on nearly every occasion. Soon invitations were coming from other Asian countries—Persia (Iran), Burma, China, Japan. His denomination back in America wanted to make him a bishop and pled with him to evangelize in his homeland as well. He worked in public venues but also behind the scenes; his secret attempts at high levels to prevent World War II in the Pacific were nearly successful, resulting in a nomination

⁴ Stephen A. Graham, *Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Mission—the Life and Work of E. Stanley Jones* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), p. 129

⁵ Graham, p. 130

⁶ Graham, p. 134

for the Nobel Peace Prize. He did not win it, but the next year he did win the Gandhi Peace Prize.

water. Come, Holy Spirit, fill us ever anew with your energy, that a watching world cannot help but be intrigued.



What power drove such an impact across cultural lines over a 66-year-period? The indwelling Holy Spirit. In Jones's first devotional book, *Victorious Living*, he noted,

This age has lost its grip upon the Holy Spirit. We have taught this age to follow Jesus as an example, and it has produced a pale, colorless Christianity. The gospel does not ask you to only follow Jesus as an example—it also offers you the resources of the Holy Spirit in the inner life, and then you follow Jesus because of an impulsion.... When the disciples got hold of that secret at Pentecost, they were decisively freed from cramping inhibitions and spiritual bondages to become flaming evangels of the Good News.⁷

In another place Jones spoke of Spirit-empowered living as “not a force pump, but an artesian well.”⁸ It is this kind of dynamic flow for which a pluralistic world desperately thirsts.

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The Holy Spirit is not an appendage to Christian theology. He is not a complication to be explained (or explained away) when speaking to inquirers. He is not someone to be ignored as we seek to bring to Good News to a complex jumble of cultures. He is in fact our gushing spring, our power source, our turbine, our Divine Wind. Without him, our sails droop, and our boats lie dead in the

⁷ E. Stanley Jones, *Victorious Living* (Minneapolis: Summerside Press, 2010), September 21 entry. This is the first in a series of Jones books to be edited and updated by Dean Merrill for new release.

⁸ Jones, *Victorious Living*, March 24 entry