

# A Critique of Grudem's Formulation and Defense of the Doctrine of Divine Eternity

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## SUMMARY

It is shown how the attempt of one theologian to explicate the doctrine of divine eternity is logically inconsistent and his attempts to defend an atemporal understanding of eternity mistaken.

## A CRITIQUE OF GRUDEM'S FORMULATION AND DEFENSE OF THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE ETERNITY

In his recent *Systematic Theology*, [1] Wayne Grudem treats all of the traditional attributes of God, a welcome change from typical contemporary theologies with their anti-metaphysical bias. Unfortunately, his treatment of divine eternity seems to me flawed both in its formulation and defense. An examination of these shortcomings will help to show how a more consistent doctrine of divine eternity might be formulated and defended.

I

Grudem defines divine eternity as follows: "God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in his own being, and he sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time" (p. 168). This definition makes it evident that Grudem construes divine eternity to be a state of timelessness, not infinite temporal duration.

Now it is immediately evident that this affirmation outstrips the biblical passages quoted by Grudem as attestation. From passages like Ps. 90.2, Grudem has no difficulty showing that God has no beginning or end: "Before the mountains were brought forth or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (cf. Ps. 90.4; 2 Pet. 3.8). But do such passages support Grudem's affirmation that "God is timeless in his own being" rather than God's beginningless and endless duration? Surely not. Grudem cites Gen. 1.1; Jn. 1.3 which indicate that God created all things "in the beginning," a phrase which Grudem takes to mean "in the beginning of all events, or in the beginning of time" ("Comments"). This line is more promising; but Grudem fails to give any argument why such passages should be taken to refer to the beginning of time rather than to the beginning of the world. Grudem is on less sure ground when he appeals to Ex. 3.14; Jn. 8.58 to prove God or Jesus's eternal presentness, if we take this in the sense of timeless existence. Of the former passage, Grudem claims that it "is probably correctly understood by the Septuagint translation in which the second 'I AM' is rendered as *ho on*, 'the being-one', or 'the one whose existence is characterized by eternal presentness'" ("Comments"). But wholly apart from the moot question of whether metaphysical

implications are to be read into the divine name—a question not discussed by Grudem—the equation of "the being-one" with one whose existence is characterized by eternal presentness in the sense of atemporal existence rather than with one whose existence is characterized by ever-present being in the sense of everlasting duration surely begs some justification. With respect to Jn. 8.58 Grudem takes Jesus's use of the present tense to express "the idea that in a time that appears to us to be past (before Abraham existed), Jesus *is*. It is reasonable to think that first century readers would have concluded this very thing from Jesus' bold statement: he has a kind of existence that experiences an eternal 'presentness' in all stages of past history" ("Comments"). But is it not more plausible to suppose that John's readers would infer from Jesus's "I am" his identity with the God of Ex. 3.14 and, hence, his deity, without going further to impute to both passages the idea of timeless existence? After all, Jesus is in time when he makes this assertion. Surely John's intention is to point to the divine nature of Christ, not to Jesus's atemporal mode of being.

In sum, Grudem's proof-texts are underdeterminative with respect to his doctrine of divine eternity. I do not claim that certain texts cannot be construed in the sense of God's timeless existence, and still less that other texts might not be more plausibly adduced in support of this doctrine; but I do claim that Grudem has not argued adequately that the texts he cites should be construed in terms of divine timelessness.

If I am correct in this, then it is to extra-biblical arguments that Grudem must turn in order to justify his doctrine of divine eternity.

That means that Grudem's affirmation of divine timelessness must be based on extra-biblical arguments. What reason does he give for considering God to be timeless? He presents the following reasoning:

The study of physics tells us that matter and time and space must all occur together: if there is no matter, there can be no space or time either. Thus, before God created the universe, there was no 'time,' at least not in the sense of a succession of moments one after another. Therefore, when God created the universe, he also created time. When God began to create the universe, time began, and there began to be a succession of moments and events one after another. But before there was a universe, and before there was time, God always existed, without beginning, and without being influenced by time . . . .

The foregoing Scripture passages and the fact that God always existed before there was any time combine to indicate to us that God's own being does not have a succession of moments or any progress from one state of existence to another (p. 169).

Unfortunately, Grudem is oblivious to the fact that his claim "God always existed before there was any

time" is patently self-contradictory, indeed, doubly so. First, to speak of God's existing "before" time is contradictory because "before" is a temporal relation. So if God existed before time, He existed at some time prior to time, which is obviously a contradiction. Secondly, to say God always existed timelessly is self-contradictory, since "always" is a temporal adverb meaning "at all times." But to say God prior to creation existed both timelessly and at all times is clearly contradictory. Grudem protests that such objections are "just quibbling" and perhaps this complaint would be justified were such contradictions due merely to a popular style of writing used to explain a doctrine which can be more rigorously formulated with consistency. But Grudem asserts that "I simply do not think it is possible to express any more clearly in English the ideas (1) that time began at Genesis 1:1 and (2) that 'prior to' Genesis 1:1 time did not exist (and therefore there was no succession of moments or events in this 'prior to' or 'before'), but (3) that in that timeless reality God still existed, and he existed not just for a brief second or any kind of finite amount of (non!)-time but that he 'always' existed timelessly" ("Comments"). Now this strikes me as an extremely serious and troublesome assertion on Grudem's part. If it is really impossible to express such ideas in a logically coherent way, without speaking of such as (non-) time or God's always existing prior to time, then how is that any different than saying that the Christian doctrine of God is simply logically incoherent? Since logical consistency is a necessary condition for truth, the sentences formulating the Christian doctrine of divine eternity are necessarily false. To believe that the Christian doctrine of God, despite its logical incoherence, is nonetheless true thus involves a *sacrificum intellectum* on the part of every believer. Perhaps Grudem could escape this conclusion by distinguishing, with many philosophers, between sentences and the propositions (or information content) expressed by those sentences. The propositions formulating the Christian doctrine of divine eternity are logically consistent, but they cannot be coherently expressed in (English) sentences. But then the Christian doctrine of God becomes literally ineffable and, since it is not clear how we could access the relevant propositions apart from linguistic expressions, rationally incomprehensible as well. Such a move would throw open wide the door to arational mysticism. It seems to me, therefore, that if we find ourselves incapable of formulating Christian doctrine in logically consistent sentences, then that ought to occasion in us the very deepest of suspicions that our understanding of that doctrine is probably defective and needs to be revised.

Fortunately, in this case I think Grudem's doctrine can be formulated consistently. We may capture the ideas behind (1)-(3) above by asserting that God *sans* the universe exists timelessly and that time begins at the moment of creation. Grudem, however, complains that if we want to quibble over language, one could justifiably assert that this formulation is no more logically coherent than his, since the present tense verb "brings in a temporal affirmation" by implying that God "is now at the present time existing" ("Comments"). But we may avoid this temporal affirmation by stipulating that the verbs in the suggested formulation are tenseless, not present tense. Philosophers employ tenseless sentences for a number of purposes, such as expressing truths of logic and mathematics in possible worlds

semantics. So long as we keep the verbs tenseless, the above formulation of Grudem's doctrine is logically coherent.

But has Grudem given adequate reason to take it as true? I think not. Notice, first of all, that his reasoning is based on a reductionistic view of time which equates time with physical time. He says, "The study of physics tells us that matter and time and space must all occur together." Certainly this is a widespread view among scientists and philosophers of science today, but it sounds strange on the lips of a Christian theologian. For Christian theists believe in realities of which physics does not know. Suppose, for example, God were to lead up to creation by counting, "1, 2, 3, . . . *fiat lux!*" In that case, there would be a series of mental events in God's mind which would constitute "a succession of moments in his own being," a "progress from one state of existence to another"--in other words, time would exist and God would be temporal wholly in the absence of any matter or space. If Grudem rejects this thought-experiment as logically impossible due to God's immutability, he must at least allow that God could have created angels who were counting down to the creation of the physical universe, so that time would exist despite the absence of matter or space.

What the Christian should hold on this issue is that Isaac Newton was correct in drawing a distinction between time and our measures of time. [2] Time as it plays a role in physics is measured time, a pale abstraction of a much richer metaphysical reality. For example, physical time is ordered by the relations *earlier/later than*, but appears to have no room for the notions of *past, present, and future* or the passage of time. Yet Grudem would agree, as we shall see, that these latter notions are features of time. It would be reductionistic to conclude that because physics knows nothing of these notions that temporal becoming is unreal and the distinction between past, present, and future a mere illusion of human consciousness. There is a lot more to time than what physics has to tell us.

So Grudem's argument does not show that God *sans* the universe exists timelessly. Even if physical time began at the moment of creation, that does not imply that time itself so began. In two footnotes, however, Grudem observes that a succession of moments extending infinitely far back into the past seems "absurd" and "is probably impossible" (pp. 169, 172). He does not develop this point, but let us concede that an infinite temporal regress is impossible. Would that suffice to demonstrate God's timelessness?

I think not. For at least two alternatives remain open: (1) One could hold that God is timeless *sans* creation and temporal subsequent to creation. A thing need not change to be temporal; it need only be really related to other changing things. In virtue of His real relation to changing creatures, God could be conceived to break out of timelessness into time at the moment of creation. (2) One could hold that God *sans* creation exists in an undifferentiated, metrically amorphous time, in which intervals cannot be distinguished. Thus, the typical problems with an infinite regress of temporal intervals could not arise.

Unfortunately, Grudem does not consider such models of divine eternity. Thus, his defense of divine timelessness is unsuccessful.

## II

We have seen that Grudem advocates a doctrine of divine eternity for which he has provided neither adequate biblical nor philosophical warrant. What about Grudem's further claim that "God sees all time equally vividly?" Grudem's exposition of this truth is unfortunately even more logically inconsistent than his treatment of God's timelessness. He appeals to Ps. 90.4 ("a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past") and II Peter 3.8 ("with the Lord one day is as a thousand years") to argue that God recalls the past vividly and experiences the present perpetually. He writes,

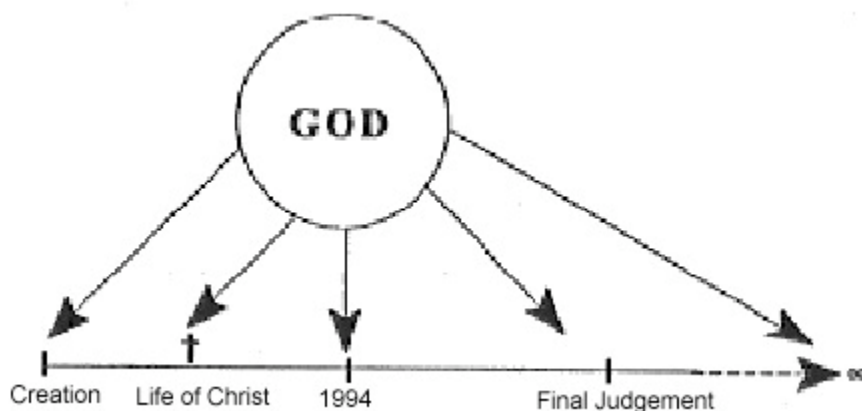
[God] can remember all the detailed events of a thousand years 'as yesterday'. . . . Such a short period of time would pass quickly and all the events would be easily recalled. Yet this is how a thousand years seems [*sic*] to God.

. . . 'One day is as a thousand years'; that is, any one day from God's perspective seems to last for 'a thousand years': it is as if that day never ends, but is always being experienced . . . . any one day seems to God to be present to his consciousness forever.

Taking these two considerations together, we can say the following: in God's perspective, any extremely long period of time is as if it just happened. And any very short period of time (such as one day) seems to God to last forever: it never ceases to be 'present' in his consciousness. Thus, God sees and knows all events past, present, and future with equal vividness (p. 170).

Now as an aside, let me say that this seems to me a wholly fanciful exegesis of Ps. 90.4 and II Peter 3.8, which are probably just making the point that to an everlasting being, finite intervals of time are a matter of indifference. More to the point, however, Grudem does not seem to notice that his account is actually incompatible with divine timelessness. Perfect recall of the past and retention of the present describe the experience of an everlasting deity, not a timeless one. A timeless God does not literally remember, retain, or anticipate anything, but has all His knowledge timelessly. A reading of Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas, all defenders of divine timelessness, would have made this clear. Moreover, Grudem's claim that for God a day lasts forever or is always present in His consciousness is problematic. If this were literally true, then God would not only be grossly mistaken, since today only lasts 24 hours, but worse He would not even know what day in the history of the world really is present, since they would all run together in His experience. Perhaps most importantly, Grudem's argument fails to secure God's knowledge of the future: it only shows at best that as each day unfolds God retains His experience of it forever. This is a completely inadequate conception of divine foreknowledge.

Grudem furnishes what amounts to an alternative and more adequate account by means of a diagram (Fig. II.1, p. 171).



Grudem interprets the diagram to show that "God somehow stands above time and is able to see it all as present in his consciousness" (p. 171). Here I think Grudem is on to something. Philosophers have distinguished between two theories of time, sometimes called the A- and the B-theories, or tensed and tenseless theories of time. According to the B-theory, all events in time--whether past, present, or future relative to us--are equally real and existent. To the people in 1994, 1994 is present, and we are in the future. The passage of time is just a subjective illusion. By contrast, on the A-theory only the present is real. The past has ceased to exist and the future has yet to come to be. Temporal becoming is real. Now it is evident that Grudem's diagram illustrates the B-theory of time: time is spread out like a spatial dimension. And I do think that given a B-theory of time, the timelessness of God is a coherent doctrine. On this view, the entire 4-dimensional, spatio-temporal manifold of events exists tenselessly, and God exists "outside" it and sustains it in being. The problem is that whether the A- or B-theory of time is correct is a hotly debated philosophical issue. If the A-theory is correct, then all events cannot be equally real for God. Theologians who wish to defend a doctrine of divine timelessness or temporality simply cannot therefore avoid this question. Unfortunately, Grudem evinces no knowledge of this debate.

Grudem is also unaware of the philosophical and theological consequences of the B-theory illustrated by his diagram. If we adopt a B-theory, then we must say that there are no tensed facts corresponding to linguistic tenses--no such facts, for example, as that *Lincoln was assassinated* or that *it is now 3:00*. We must hold that we are all victims of the most gigantic and pervasive illusion imaginable, that of temporal becoming, that moments and events really elapse. We must believe that we are all irrational in entertaining feelings of relief or anticipation, nostalgia or dread, since events in the past or future are just as real as the present and, indeed, are present to us at the relevant times. Theologically, we must affirm that the universe is co-eternal with God. To say that the universe began to exist just means that

the tenselessly existing four-dimensional manifold has a front edge. But there never obtains a state of affairs of God's existing alone, without the universe. These are conclusions which ought to give serious pause to any would-be advocate of divine timelessness.

In a personal communication, Grudem emphatically repudiates the B-theory of time, stating, "I certainly do not agree" that "past, present, and future events are equally real and equally existent" ("Comments"). But then it is difficult to see how Fig. II.1 does not represent a serious distortion of time, leaving the alleged presence of all events to God obscure.

### III

The final element in Grudem's definition of divine eternity is that "God sees events in time and acts in time." Unfortunately, here again Grudem's exposition seems to be logically incoherent. Classical defenders of divine timelessness like Thomas Aquinas would say that God acts timelessly to produce effects in time. Given a B-theory of time, this seems to be a coherent doctrine. But Grudem seems to affirm that God's acts *themselves* are in time: he speaks of "a previous way in which God acted, God's present way of acting, and a future activity that he will carry out, all in time" (p. 172). Or again he affirms that "God predicts his actions at one point in time and then carries out his actions at a later point in time;" He "acts differently at different points in time" (p. 172). Now such a view is logically incompatible with timelessness. If God has different acts at different times, then He is changing. At  $t_1$  He has the property of causing an event  $E_1$ , and at  $t_2$  He no longer has that property; instead He has a property He did not have before, that of causing  $E_2$ . These are real properties, real exercises of causal power. Or look at it this way: at  $t_1$  He knows "I am now causing  $E_1$ ," and at  $t_2$  He knows "I am no longer causing  $E_1$ . I am now causing  $E_2$ ." Thus, His knowledge is changing. Hence, God must be in time.

Grudem tries to elude this objection by drawing a dichotomy between "what God is in his own being (he exists without . . . succession of moments)" and "what God does outside of himself (he creates in time and acts in time . . .)" (p. 172). But changes in a thing's relational properties are just as temporalizing as changes in a thing's intrinsic properties. For example, if Theatetus becomes shorter than Socrates because of an increase in Socrates's height, then Theatetus has undergone a relational change, even if he has himself remained intrinsically unchanged. Such a relational change clearly requires time in order to occur, since Theatetus cannot stand in the relations of *being taller than* and *being shorter than* with respect to Socrates at the same time. In the same way, God existing alone *sans* creation stands in no such relations as *sustaining the universe in being* or *co-existing with the universe*. But once the universe has come to exist, God does, it seems, stand in such relations. Even if creating the universe involves no intrinsic change in God, it does involve an extrinsic, or relational, change and is therefore temporalizing. It is precisely for this reason that Thomas Aquinas insisted that God sustains no real relations with the universe, which solution seems wholly implausible in view of the universe's being

caused by God. [3] Grudem does not embrace Thomas's solution, but neither does he offer any other solution to the problem of God's undergoing relational change. Moreover, as we saw above, changes in God's acts would involve intrinsic changes in God. The actions of an agent involve exercises of causal power on the part of that agent. Thus, if he acts at different times, he is changing in his exercises of causal power, which is an intrinsic change in a being, as the classical defenders of divine timelessness realized. Hence, Grudem's position that "although God in his own being is outside of time, his actions are actions that occur within the creation and within time which is part of creation" is untenable ("Comments").

So it seems that in order to maintain a coherent doctrine of divine timelessness, Grudem should have affirmed that while God's acts are timeless, His effects are in time, a claim which is comprehensible given the B-theory of time.

#### IV

In conclusion, then, Grudem's treatment of divine eternity is multiply flawed both in its formulation and defense. This does not imply that the doctrine of divine timelessness is either incoherent or indefensible. The same sort of weaknesses in formulation and defense could have been shown to characterize, for example, Clark Pinnock's defense of divine temporality. I hope only to have shown that Grudem's own attempt to formulate and defend his view of God's eternity is in need of major revision.

Footnotes:

#### [\[1\]](#)

Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994). Page references in the text will be to this volume. I am indebted to Dr. Grudem for his critical comments on a first draft of this paper (Wayne Grudem to William Craig, October 1, 1996). Citations of these comments will appear as "Comments."

#### [\[2\]](#)

Isaac Newton, *Sir Isaac Newton's 'Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy' and his 'System of the World,'* trans. Andrew Motte, rev. with an Appendix by Florian Cajori, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 1:6.

#### [\[3\]](#)

For discussion see my "The Tensed vs. Tenseless Theory of Time: a Watershed for Conceptions of Divine Eternity," in ed. Robin Le Poidevin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).