

God, Time, and Eternity

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SUMMARY

Explores whether God is timeless or everlasting throughout infinite time.

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GOD, TIME, AND ETERNITY

It's a delight to be here, and I'm particularly gratified that Walter mentioned the Evangelical Philosophical Society. God has been doing a remarkable work in the field of philosophy in the Anglo-American realm, and the growth in the Evangelical Philosophical Society is just one evidence of this. I've brought along some copies of our journal, *Philosophia Christi*, for any of you who would like to look at it more closely for yourselves. We welcome both associate members as well as full members into the Society. Both types of membership include a subscription to the journal, so I would invite you to take a look afterwards at it if you're interested.

In the program, the topic that I'm listed to be speaking on today is the topic of the elimination of absolute time by the special theory of relativity. However, in the interim I changed my mind about that topic, and having listened to Sir John yesterday, I was very glad that I did because I think that Professor Polkinghorne very effectively exploded the idea that the special theory of relativity has eliminated Newton's concept of absolute time. As Sir John said, the notion of time, or temporality, is a meta-scientific or metaphysical notion at bottom and therefore cannot be pronounced upon ultimately by science. Indeed, I would be so bold as to say that relativity theory actually teaches us nothing about the nature of time but everything about our physical measures of time. So I was glad that I had changed my topic from addressing specifically relativity theory to a more general discussion of the topic "God, Time, and Eternity."

"God," declares the prophet Isaiah, "is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity" (Is. 57.15). But being a prophet and not a philosopher, Isaiah didn't pause to reflect upon the *nature* of divine eternity. Minimally, to be eternal means to be without beginning and end. To say that God is eternal means minimally that he never came into being and will never go out of being. To exist eternally is to exist permanently.

But having said that, we must note that there are at least two ways in which something could exist eternally. One way would be to exist omnitemporally—that is to say, at every point in time. And if time is extended infinitely into the past and into the future, then a being which existed omnitemporally would exist without beginning and end. He would never come into existence or go

out of existence; he would exist permanently. And typically, the Scripture speaks of God in terms of his everlasting, omnitemporal duration. For example, Psalm 90.2 says, "O Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place for all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the Earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." The picture here in the psalmist's mind is of an omnitemporal God who endures for all time, from eternity past into eternity future.

On the other hand, a being could exist eternally, without beginning and end, if such a being were altogether timeless; that is to say, a being which completely transcended time, which had no temporal location and therefore no temporal extension but just existed outside of time, would have neither beginning nor end. Such a being would simply exist in a single, timeless "present," if you will. Although the Scripture does not speak of God explicitly in terms of such timeless eternity, there are, nevertheless, some biblical passages that do intimate a transcendence of God beyond time. For example, Genesis 1.1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And then it goes on to describe his creation of the first day and the second day, and the third, and so forth. Thus this beginning envisioned by the author of Genesis may not simply be a beginning of the material universe, the cosmos, but a beginning of time itself. Now since God didn't begin to exist, this would imply that God, in some difficult-to-articulate way, existed beyond the beginning of time—beyond the commencement of time in the universe described in verse 1.

Similarly, in the New Testament there are a number of very interesting passages that speak of God's existence before time. For example, in the doxology at the conclusion of the book of Jude, verse 25, we read, "To the only God, our savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority *before all time and now and forever.*" In this passage, in an almost inevitable *façon de parler*, or manner of speaking, the author speaks of God as existing before all time; in some sense, God exists beyond time. If time is finite and had a commencement, then God, being eternal, must in some way exist beyond time.

So the biblical data are not clear on the nature of divine eternity. There are passages which intimate that God might be omnitemporal and passages which intimate that he might be utterly timeless, and therefore it's impossible to decide this question biblically. We must turn to rational, theological and philosophical reflection in order to adjudicate the nature of divine eternity.

Now someone might say at this point, "Why do such a thing? Why not simply rest content with the biblical affirmation that God is without beginning and end and exists permanently, and let it go at that, and not try to decide between these two competing theories of divine eternity?" I want to suggest two reasons why I think it is important that we delve into this topic more deeply and not just rest with the minimalist interpretation.

The first reason is apologetical in nature. Namely, modern naturalism often attacks theism, or belief in God, not simply on the basis of a lack of evidence for the existence of God but because, as naturalists sometimes claim, the very concept of God is incoherent and therefore there cannot be a being that falls under that concept. A good example of this would be the prize-winning physicist, P. C. W. Davies in his book *God and the New Physics*, which was a runaway best seller when it first came out and catapulted Davies into instant fame as one of the best scientific popularizers of our day. Davies argues that God can be neither temporal nor timeless. He says that God cannot be timeless because God, as described in the Bible, is a person; but persons are inherently temporal in nature. They act and react, they're conscious beings who deliberate and anticipate and remember. They think about things. They intend to do things and then carry out those projects. All of these are temporal activities, and therefore if God is personal, as the Bible claims, God cannot be atemporal, or timeless.

On the other hand, says Davies, neither can God be temporal. For if God exists in time, then He is subject to the laws of relativity theory which govern space and time, and therefore He cannot be omnipotent because he's under the laws of nature. So the theist is confronted with a dilemma. The theist believes that God is both personal and omnipotent; but if he is both of these he can be neither timeless nor temporal, and therefore such a God simply cannot exist. The God of the Bible does not exist.

Now in answer to someone like Professor Davies, it is futile simply to quote Bible verses to him because his argument is that the biblical concept of God is incoherent. So the Christian theologian needs to provide some sort of coherent model, or theory, of divine eternity which will escape Davies' dilemma.

The second reason that we cannot, I think, remain silent on the issue is doctrinal. That is to say, for better or worse, there has already been a good deal of careless statements that have been made about the doctrine of divine eternity, so that it is pointless to remain silent now. The cat is already out of the bag! Preachers from the pulpit constantly make statements about "our going to be with the Lord in eternity," and so forth. Many times, I think, these statements are theologically inaccurate. A good illustration of this problem is the book *Disappointment with God* by the popular Christian author Phillip Yancey. Now I want to say immediately that I enjoyed reading *Disappointment with God* and found much of it to be meaningful and poignant. But nevertheless, the centerpiece of Yancey's solution to the problem of disappointment with God—that is to say, disappointment for the gratuitous suffering and evil that God permits in our lives—the centerpiece of his solution is Yancey's doctrine of divine eternity. But when you read his explication of eternity, you find that it is self-contradictory. He actually adopts two analogies for divine eternity that support mutually exclusive views. One of them supports divine timelessness; the other supports

divine omnitemporality. So at the very heart of his book is this logical incoherence that leaves the problem of disappointment with God unsolved.

Therefore, we simply cannot afford, I think, as reflective Christians, to remain silent upon the nature of divine eternity. We need to engage in the project of sorting out a theory or model of divine eternity which is biblically faithful and logically coherent.

Now having said that, I want to emphasize that we do not do so dogmatically because the Scriptures are open on this issue. The theory that we develop will be held tentatively. It will be put forth as a suggested model for the Christian community to scrutinize and assess. And in fact, when you look at the contemporary scene, you find that Christian scholars do differ on their understanding of divine eternity. Traditionally, God's eternity has been understood in terms of timelessness. God simply transcends time; He doesn't exist in time. He doesn't exist now, but He exists simply timelessly. Great proponents of this view have been people like St. Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas. And on the contemporary scene, such philosophers as Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzman, Paul Helm, Brian Leftow, and John Yates have all defended the theory of divine timelessness.

On the other hand, there have also been a considerable number of thinkers who have defended divine temporality. Among classical authors we might mention John Duns Scotus or William Ockham. Isaac Newton, the great father of modern physics, in his Scholium to the *Principia*, which is printed in your packet of materials for this conference, defended divine temporality. On the contemporary scene, such thinkers as Alan Padgett, Richard Swinburne, Stephen Davis, and Nicholas Wolterstorff have all opted for models of divine temporality.

Now clearly, both of these views cannot be right because they are contradictory to one another. To say that God is timeless is simply to say that He is not temporal. So one is the negation, or denial, of the other. If God is timeless, He is not temporal; if He is temporal, then by definition He is not timeless. Very often, lay people will say, "Well, why can't God be both? Why can't He be both temporal and atemporal?" Well, the problem with that answer is that unless you can provide a model that makes sense of that claim, it is flatly self-contradictory and therefore cannot be true. It's like saying that something is both black and not black. That is logically impossible, unless you can provide some sort of model that would provide a distinction that would make it possible. For example, something might be black on one side and not black on the other side. Or it might be black at one time but later be non-black at another time. So if you're going to maintain that God is both temporal and atemporal, you need to provide some sort of a model that would make sense of that. But obviously, in this case neither of these two alternatives would do because one part of God can't be temporal and the other part atemporal, because as an immaterial being God doesn't

have separable parts. He's not made up of parts. Neither can you say coherently that God is atemporal at one time and temporal at another time because it's flatly self-contradictory to say that He's non-temporal at a certain time. That's a contradiction in terms. So both of these views of divine eternity cannot be right. We have to decide whether God is timeless or temporal.

So what I'd like to do today is first to look at arguments for and against divine timelessness and then to look at arguments for and against divine temporality.

Now most of the arguments for divine timelessness that I read in the literature I find to be either clearly fallacious or at best inconclusive. But there is one argument for divine timelessness that I do find very persuasive, and this is the argument based upon the incompleteness of temporal life. Temporal life is radically incomplete in that we do not yet have our future, and we no longer have our past. Our past is continually receding away, and we're always reaching out toward the future we do not have. Our only hold on existence is the present moment that is ever fleeting, ever vanishing, ever passing away. And yet this is the only hold on existence that we as temporal beings have. Our lives are thus radically evanescent and have such a tenuous hold on existence. But this seems incompatible with the life of a most perfect being, such as God is.

This evanescence of temporal life was brought home to me several years ago in an unexpectedly powerful way as I was reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's book *Little House in the Big Woods* to our small children, Charity and John. Now you wouldn't expect this book to be a source of philosophical insight, but as I came to the final, closing paragraphs of this book, I was absolutely stunned by what I read. (It didn't have this impact upon my children, but it hit me like a hammer!) This is what she wrote:

The long winter evenings of firelight and music had come again Pa's strong, sweet voice was softly singing:

'Shall auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Shall auld acquaintance be forgot,
And the days of auld lang syne?
And the days of auld lang syne, my friend,
And the days of auld lang syne,
Shall auld acquaintance be forgot,
And the days of auld lang syne?'

When the fiddle had stopped singing Laura called out softly, 'What are days of auld lang syne, Pa?'

'They are the days of a long time ago, Laura,' Pa said. 'Go to sleep, now.'

But Laura lay awake a little while, listening to Pa's fiddle softly playing and to the lonely sound of the wind in the Big Woods. She looked at Pa sitting on the bench by the hearth, the firelight gleaming on his brown hair and beard and glistening on the honey-brown fiddle. She looked at Ma, gently rocking and knitting.

She thought to herself, 'This is now.'

She was glad that the cosy house, and Pa and Ma and the firelight and the music, were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago. [1]

What makes this passage so poignant, of course, is that now that time that Laura Ingalls thought was so real, was "now" for her, *is* long ago. It's gone—gone forever! Ma and Pa are gone. The American frontier is gone. Laura Ingalls Wilder herself is gone. Those years that she called "the happy, golden days" are gone, gone forever, never to be reclaimed. Time has a savage way of gnawing away at existence, making our claim upon existence tenuous and fleeting. And surely this is incompatible with the life of a most perfect being, such as God is. A perfect being must have his life all at once, complete, never passing away or yet to come. In other words, the life of a perfect being must be a timeless existence in which he exists in an eternal now that never passes away.

This argument for divine atemporality strikes me as extremely plausible and powerful. And yet I don't think it's entirely demonstrative because I think that the fleetingness of time is diminished for an omniscient being. Part of the reason that time's tooth seems so savage to us is because we no longer have a complete memory of the past or anticipation of the future in our minds. But for an omniscient being who knows completely past, present, and future as though they were right now, the fleeting nature of time's passage is not so melancholy an affair. God can recall past events and relive them with a vividness and reality as though they were present. Similarly, He foreknows events to come in the future with the same sort of reality with which He can know present events. So for a being who has complete recollection of the past and complete foreknowledge of the future, the passage of time is not so severe and detrimental a defect as it is for us finite, temporal creatures. Nevertheless, in the absence of countermanding arguments for divine temporality, I do think this argument does give some plausible grounds for affirming that God is atemporal.

What objections, then, might be raised against divine timelessness? Well, one of the most popular objections that has been raised in the literature is that timelessness and personhood are incompatible. Persons engage in activities such as anticipation of the future and recollection of the past; in deliberation and discursive thinking; in experiencing conscious feelings. All of these are temporal activities. Therefore, the idea of a timeless person is said to be incoherent.

Well, is this a good argument? I'm not persuaded that it is a good objection. Let's conduct a thought experiment: imagine that God had refrained from creating the world. Imagine God existing without creation. We can think of a possible world in which God alone exists, solitary, alone, without any universe or created order whatsoever. Would God, in such a world, be temporal? Well, if He had a stream of consciousness, clearly He would be temporal because there would be a temporal series of mental events going on in His mind. But let's suppose that God exists changelessly in such a state, that He has a single state of consciousness. Would He, in that case, be temporal? Well, I think that's far from obvious. On the contrary, on a relational view of time in which time is a concomitant of events, such a changeless state would be a state of timelessness. So God existing in such a state would, I think, plausibly be timeless.

Someone might say, "A personal being cannot exist in a timeless way." Well, why not? What are the conditions sufficient for personhood? Well, it seems to me that the condition which is necessary and sufficient for personhood is self-consciousness. To know oneself as a self, to have self-awareness and self-consciousness and, hence, intentionality and freedom of the will is sufficient for personhood. But self-consciousness is not an inherently temporal notion. God can simply know all truth in a single intuition of truth without having to learn it or having to come by it through a process. As long as His consciousness does not change, there is no reason to ascribe to God temporality. So there is nothing about a self-conscious life that entails temporality as long as it is a changeless self-consciousness.

As for these other properties we mentioned, I would say that while these are *common* properties of human persons (who are, after all, temporal), these are not *essential* properties of personhood. For example, take deliberation and discursive thinking; this is excluded from God not so much because of His timelessness but because of His omniscience. An omniscient being doesn't need to deliberate because he already knows the conclusions to anything that he might think about. And therefore God's thought life cannot be discursive if He's an omniscient being. He simply knows all truth in a single intuition at a single moment. Similarly, memory and anticipation are not essential to a timeless person because he has nothing to forget and nothing to anticipate if he simply exists timelessly. There is no past and future. So these qualities, though common to human persons, are not essential to personhood, and therefore it seems to me that there is no incoherence in speaking of God as a timeless, personal being.

In fact, I think that the doctrine of the Trinity can help us out here, because the doctrine of the Trinity provides a useful model for God's timeless existence. Very often, people will say that persons have to exist in interpersonal relationships, and therefore God would have to be temporal. But what that assumes is that the persons to whom God is related would have to be human persons. But according to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, that is not true. God, in His

own being, is tri-personal, and in the unity of His own being God can enjoy the fullness of interpersonal relationships within the Godhead itself in a timeless and changeless way. Everything the Father knows, the Son and the Spirit know; what the Father loves, the Spirit and the Son love; what the Son wills, the Father and the Spirit will. This is the doctrine of *perichoresis*, according to which the three persons of the Godhead are completely transparent to one another and interpenetrate one another. And just as we sometimes speak metaphorically of two lovers who sit just staring into each other's eyes, not speaking a word, as "lost in that timeless moment," so, in a literal way, God in the interpersonal relationships of the Trinity, can exist in a timeless moment of complete love, fulfillment, and blissfulness in the self-sufficiency of his own being. Thus I am not at all persuaded that timelessness and personhood are incompatible; it seems to me quite possible, and plausible, that God can exist timelessly while being personal.

So in summary, then, we've seen one good argument for divine timelessness—not decisive, but, I think, a plausible argument—and so far no good reason to reject divine timelessness.

What about divine temporality? Let me share with you two arguments in favor of divine temporality. The first argument is the argument based upon God's causal relationship to the world. In order to understand this, you need first to understand the difference between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* change. Something changes intrinsically if one of its properties changes, which it has in isolation from its relationship to anything else. For example, a ripening apple turns from green to red; that's an intrinsic change in the apple. Something changes extrinsically if it changes in its relations to something else. For example, I was once taller than my son John, but I am now shorter than my son John, not because of any intrinsic change in me, but because of an intrinsic change in him. He has grown taller. I have become shorter than John by undergoing an extrinsic change. I have remained intrinsically changeless in terms of my height, but I have undergone extrinsic change in relation to John in that, because of his change in height, I am now in a new relation, namely *smaller than*, whereas before I stood in a different relation, *taller than*, to my son. So thus I have undergone a relational or extrinsic change.

Now in order for something to be temporal, it doesn't need to be intrinsically changing. All it needs to experience is extrinsic change in its relations. For example, imagine a rock existing in outer space, frozen at absolute zero. (Now I know that's physically impossible, but this is just a thought experiment.) Let's imagine this rock is frozen at absolute zero, so it is absolutely changeless intrinsically. Would that rock be timeless? Well, I think clearly not, because it could still change extrinsically in its relation to things around it. A meteor whizzes by—a little later, another meteor whizzes by—and a little later, another meteor whizzes by. Even though the rock is intrinsically changeless, it clearly stands in temporal relations with these successive events. And therefore merely extrinsic change is sufficient for a temporal existence.

Now God, as the creator of the universe, is causally related to the world. He brings the world into existence. And the question is, would God be temporal in virtue of His changing relationships with a temporal universe? Let's do a thought experiment.

Imagine God existing once more, alone, without the world, without the creation. Now in such a state, God is either timeless or temporal. If He's temporal, then the issue is decided. God is in time. So let's suppose that He's timeless. And now let's suppose that God decides to create the world, and He brings the universe into being. Now when He does so, God either remains timeless or else He becomes temporal in virtue of his new relationship to a changing world. If God becomes temporal, then clearly He is in time. So could God remain timeless while creating the universe? Well, I don't think so. Why? Because in creating the universe God undergoes at least an extrinsic change—a relational change. At the moment of creation He comes into a new relation in which he did not stand before because there was no "before." It's the first moment of time. And at the first moment of time, He comes into this new relation of *sustaining the universe* or at least of *co-existing with the universe*, a relation in which He did not stand before. And thus, in virtue of this extrinsic, relational change, God would be brought into time at the moment of creation.

Thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas attempted to elude the force of this argument by denying that God sustains any real relations with the created order. Aquinas granted that if God does come into new relations at the moment of creation, like *being Lord*, then He would be temporal. So Aquinas was driven to deny that God sustains any real relations to the world. Aquinas said that we as creatures are related really to God as His effects, but God is not really related to us as our cause or Creator. But I think that such a doctrine is clearly an expedient of desperation. God is causally related to the universe, and it seems impossible or incoherent to say that there could be real effects without a real cause. How could we be really related to God as effect to cause, but God not related to us as cause to effect? Moreover, God seems clearly related to us in that He knows us, He loves us, and He wills our existence. So it seems to me that Aquinas' solution is simply not plausible. These are real relations by any sensible definition of the term "real relation." Therefore I think we have a powerful reason for thinking that in virtue of His causal relationship to a temporal creation, God is temporal.

The second argument that I'd like to share is the argument based upon God's knowledge of tensed facts. In order to understand this argument, we need to appreciate the difference between "tensed facts" and "tenseless facts." For example, it is a tenseless fact that the C. S. Lewis conference in Cambridge begins on 21 July 2002. That fact never changes. It has always been true, it will always be true, it is tenselessly true that the C. S. Lewis conference in Cambridge begins 21 July 2002. But that tenseless fact is not enough information to prompt me to leave

Atlanta, board a plane on the 20th of July, and fly to Cambridge. Why not? Well, because that tenseless fact is *always* true. What do I need to know, in addition to that tenseless fact, in order to prompt me to board the plane to fly to Cambridge? What I need to know is the tensed fact that today is July 20, or tomorrow is July 21. In virtue of knowing that tensed fact, I board the plane and come to Cambridge for the conference. So tensed facts are facts about the relationship of certain events to the present moment. In the English language tensed facts can be expressed by verbal tenses, like the past tense, the present tense, or the future tense; or by adverbs like "today," "yesterday," and "tomorrow;" or by prepositional phrases like "in two days' time," or "three days ago." All of these are ways of expressing tensed facts.

Now notice that I, in virtue of knowing tensed facts, must have a temporal location. If I know today is July 20, then I am located at July 20. Moreover, in knowing tensed facts, I would be constantly changing. I would know that today is July 20. The next day I would then know that today is July 21 and the next day that today is July 22. So any being that knows tensed facts is undergoing change and is therefore temporal. As an omniscient being, God cannot be ignorant of tensed facts. He must know not only the tenseless facts about the universe, but He must also know tensed facts about the world. Otherwise, God would be literally ignorant of what is going on now in the universe. He wouldn't have any idea of what is now happening in the universe because that is a tensed fact. He would be like a movie director who has a knowledge of a movie film lying in the canister; he knows what picture is on every frame of the film lying in the can, but he has no idea of which frame is now being projected on the screen in the theater downtown. Similarly, God would be ignorant of what is now happening in the universe. That is surely incompatible with a robust doctrine of divine omniscience. Therefore I am persuaded that if God is omniscient, He must know tensed facts and, therefore, must be in time.

So we have two good arguments, I think, for divine temporality. What objections might be raised against God's being in time? Again, let me mention two. The first objection to God's being in time is that both of the two arguments that I just gave for divine temporality presuppose a dynamic view of time. As we have already heard in the course of this conference, philosophers of time differ with respect to two radically distinct approaches to the nature of time. According to a dynamic theory of time, temporal becoming is objective and real. The past no longer exists; the future does not yet exist and is pure potentiality; and things come into being in the present and go out of being as they lapse away, so that temporal process is dynamic and real. Past, present, and future are objective features of reality. John Polkinghorne and Bob Russell enunciated this view.

By contrast, theorists who hold to a static view of time think of all moments in time as equally real, whether past, present, or future. Time is like a spatial continuum, and events are ordered by *earlier than* and *later than* on this continuum; but the distinction between past, present, and future

is just a subjective illusion of human consciousness. In reality, the universe is a four-dimensional block that just exists. It never comes into being and never goes out of being. It is really co-eternal with God, and it can be said to be created only in the sense that it eternally depends upon God for its existence. It has a beginning only in the sense that a meter stick has a beginning, namely, there's a first centimeter. But it doesn't come into existence; the four-dimensional space-time block just exists. Similarly, on the static theory of time there really are no tensed facts. Linguistic tense serves only to express the subjective perspective of the user. There is no objective truth about what is now happening in the universe, for "now," like "here," serves merely to pick out the subjective perspective of some person. Every person at every time in the space-time universe regards his time as "now" and others as "past" or "future." But in objective reality there is no "now" in the world. Everything just exists tenselessly. Russell Stannard enunciated this view.

If one adopts a static view of time and so denies the objective reality of temporal becoming and tensed facts, then the two arguments for divine temporality are undercut. The argument based on God's real relation to the world assumed the objective reality of temporal becoming, and the argument based on God's knowledge of the temporal world assumed the objective reality of tensed facts. But if a static view of time is right, nothing to which God is related ever comes into or passes out of being, and all facts tenselessly exist, so that God undergoes neither extrinsic nor intrinsic change. He can be the immutable, omniscient Sustainer and Knower of all things and, hence, exist timelessly. For if time exists as part of a four-dimensional block, God doesn't change in His causal relations to the world. Existing outside of time, He just causes everything to occur in the four-dimensional block at its various space-time locations. But He's absolutely changeless in His causal relations to the world. Similarly, on the static view of time there are no tensed facts. Tensed facts are a subjective illusion of human consciousness. There really is no "now" in the space-time block. There is no past and future. Those are just perspectives of different people in the block, but none of them is objective and real. So if you adopt a static view of time, the arguments I presented for divine temporality are undercut.

Therefore, I am persuaded that one's theory of divine eternity will stand or fall with respect to the decision one takes with regard to a dynamic versus a static theory of time. If you adopt the dynamic theory of time, you should believe in divine temporality. If you adopt a static theory of time, then the most plausible view would be divine atemporality.

Now in my talk this morning I don't have time to delve into this issue. This would take a whole lecture, a whole seminar itself. But if you're interested, I go into the arguments for and against a static and dynamic theory of time in my book *Time and Eternity*. And, for what it's worth, my judgment is that the arguments for a dynamic theory of time are superior to the arguments for a static theory of time. I think that time is dynamic, that the static theory of time is open to severe

philosophical objections and, I even think, theological objections, whereas the dynamic theory of time comports with both our experience as well as with what philosophy tells us about the nature of time. Therefore I am persuaded that time is dynamic, and, hence, I come down on the side of divine temporality.

But there's a second objection to divine temporality that we need to deal with before we can conclude, and that is the question: why didn't God create the world sooner? The German philosopher Leibniz pressed this objection against the Newtonian philosopher Samuel Clarke in their correspondence. Clarke, like Newton, believed that God had endured through an infinite, empty, dead time up until a certain moment, at which He created the universe. And Leibniz said, "Why didn't He create the world sooner?" Why would God endure this period of creative idleness for infinity before He created the world, and why would he create the world when He did, rather than sooner or later? Look at it this way. On this Newtonian view, at any time t prior to the moment of creation, God delayed creating until some later moment $t + n$. At any moment in the infinite past you pick, God at that moment could have created the world but nevertheless chose not to. Though God has willed from eternity to create a universe, He deliberately refrained from creating at that moment and delayed until some later time. But surely God must have had a good reason for doing something like that. A supremely rational being, such as God is, would not delay carrying out His will for no good reason. But in an infinite, empty time, there can be no reason for preferring one moment rather than another at which to create, for in an infinite, empty time, all moments are alike. They're indistinguishable, and thus there can be no reason for preferring one moment rather than another, and thus no reason for God to delay creating at some time t until $t + n$. Therefore, Leibniz argued, you must say that time began at the moment of creation, that God has not endured through an infinite, empty time up until creation, but rather that time began at the very moment of creation. This is exactly the view that St. Augustine also adopted in dealing with this problem.

But now we have an extremely bizarre situation. We've seen that time must have had a beginning. God exists in time. And yet God is beginningless. How do you make sense of that? How can God exist in time, time have a beginning, and yet God be beginningless? It doesn't seem to make sense. Does this force us to say that therefore God is simply atemporal?

Well, I think not, and I want to propose a model for divine eternity that I think will resolve this problem. Let's suppose that time begins at the moment of creation, and let's call that moment "the Big Bang" for the sake of convenience. Then God would not exist literally before the Big Bang, because to exist *before* the Big Bang is to be in a temporal relation. So God would not be temporally before the Big Bang. He would in some mysterious way exist *beyond* the Big Bang, but not *before* the Big Bang. Now in such a state, He would clearly have to exist in a changeless

way, because if there were events, if He were changing, then time would not begin at the Big Bang. It would begin with those first events. So God existing beyond the Big Bang must exist changelessly. But such a changeless, eventless state is, as I say, plausibly taken to be a state of timelessness. Therefore the model I want to propose is that *God exists timelessly without creation and temporally subsequent to creation.*

I think we can get a physical analogy for this from the notion of an initial cosmological singularity. The cosmological singularity in which our universe began is, strictly speaking, not part of space and time, and therefore it is not earlier than the universe; rather, it is the boundary of space and time. The singularity is *causally prior* to our universe, but it is not *chronologically prior* to the universe. It exists on the boundary of space-time. Analogously, I want to suggest that we think of eternity, like the singularity, as the boundary of time. God is causally prior, but not chronologically prior, to the universe. His changeless, timeless, eternal state is the boundary of time, at which He exists without the universe, and at the moment of creation God enters into time in virtue of His real relation to the created order and His knowledge of tensed facts, so that God is timeless without creation and temporal subsequent to creation.

Now this remarkable conclusion, I think, deserves serious reflection. It means that God, in creation as in the incarnation, has undertaken an act of condescension for our sake. Existing alone in the fullness of the intra-Trinitarian love relationships, God has no need of temporal persons to relate to. In His perfect timeless existence there is no deficit in His mode of existence—no deficiency to be filled. But out of His love and grace He chose to create a temporal world of finite creatures so that they might be invited to share the inner Trinitarian life of the Godhead and the love of the three persons of the Trinity. So God, in creation, stoops to enter into, and to undertake, our temporal mode of existence in order to relate to us and bring us into relationship with himself. And, of course, in the incarnation He stoops even lower still to take on, not merely our mode of existence, but our very human nature itself.

This, I think, makes good sense of the relationship of God and time. God is timeless without creation and temporal subsequent to creation. Having entered into time, He is not dependent upon finite velocity light signals or clock synchronization procedures for knowing what time it is. Rather, existing in absolute time, God is, as Newton proclaimed, the Lord God of dominion of His universe. In the words of St. Jude: "To the only God our savior through Jesus Christ, our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority before all time and now and forever."

Discussion

Q. (Hugh Ross): Bill, when the Bible speaks about time, is it not possible that it's restricting itself to cosmic time? And since we can conceive of time as multi-directional, multi-dimensional, and stoppable, properties which cosmic time does not possess, can we not conceive of temporality independent of cosmic time, and timelessness, therefore, could simply be existence beyond cosmic time. Doesn't Scripture speak temporally of "before the beginning of time"? Aren't these possibilities, at least?

A. Yes. Certainly it's possible to think of God as existing in some sort of a second time dimension that would be a sort of hyper-time in which our ordinary time is embedded. But I'm not persuaded, as you know, Hugh, that this is a good alternative, a plausible alternative. I think that it's metaphysically extravagant to postulate a hyper-time, a second dimension of time. There's no scientific evidence for it. In multi-dimensional string theories, as you know, these additional dimensions are *spatial* dimensions, not *temporal* dimensions. They all evolve in the single time dimension that begins with the Big Bang. So it's a metaphysical extravagance to postulate a hyper-time.

Secondly, I don't think positing a second time dimension really solves anything because all of the problems we talked about regarding the first dimension of time will simply recur with regard to the second dimension of time. Is the hyper-time a tenseless or a tensed time? Is it dynamic or static? And the whole thing just recurs over again. So I don't think it really solves anything.

Finally, my third point would be that I do think positing a second time dimension is open to certain objections, namely, I think that you can only make sense of a hyper-time by construing the unidimensional time in which we live and exist as a static time. If our time is a dynamic time, then it can't be embedded in a higher time dimension. To think of it as a higher time dimension is treating it like a spatial dimension, in which you can take, say, length and add to it width, so that you get a plane. But time isn't stretched out like a linear figure spatially if you have a dynamic theory of time. It will only work on a static theory. And since I don't think the static theory is correct, for numerous reasons, therefore I don't think, ultimately, that hyper-time is metaphysically possible. So for those reasons I would reject it.

Q. (Hugh Ross): Well, how about the possibility of a hyper-hyper time? In other words some God capacity completely independent of any concept of time we have but which would nevertheless allow God to--

A. See, when you use the idea of extra-dimensionality, I think you're really using it as a metaphor for something that's not literally a higher time dimension. It's a metaphor for saying that God has

the capacity to work in our time in ways that are extraordinary, or something of that sort. And certainly I would grant that, but I don't think that the metaphor of embedding higher time dimensions is a useful metaphor because it's too misleading. If taken literally, as I say, I think it's extravagant, it doesn't solve the problem, and it has serious objections.

Q. Thank you for your excellent talk! The concept of the immutability, the changelessness of God, is, I think, essential if we are to stay away from process theology or other areas where I think we could go wrong. If God is timeless before creation and temporal after creation, are you implying some change in His nature, His essence, or His character, or simply his relation to time?

A. Very good question! I am not in any way implying a change in God's nature. Remember, I spoke of His undergoing *extrinsic* change, change in relationships. This wouldn't be a change in His nature. I do think God also changes in intrinsic ways—for example, knowing what time it is. He knows it's now t_1 , now it's t_2 , now it's t_3 . But I think that these kinds of trivial changes are not at all threatening to an orthodox concept of God. What is crucial is that God not change in His attributes of omnipresence, omnipotence, holiness, love, eternity, necessity, and all the rest. Those would all be preserved as essential attributes of God on this model.

Q. You said at the beginning of your lecture that laymen quite often ask the question, "Why could God not be both timeless and in time?" I would ask it again: Why could God not be timelessly existent or temporal? I think there is an element of timelessness within time. That's my argument.

A. Well, did you notice that the model I adopted in the end really is that layman's intuition? Namely, I argued that God is *both* atemporal and temporal. That is the layman's intuition, but unless you give a model, that's just a flat contradiction. That's like saying that something is A and not-A, and that's logically incoherent. That's impossible. But I've tried to provide a model so that it's no longer self-contradictory. How do I qualify it? God is timeless without the universe and temporal subsequent to the beginning of the universe. What I've done, in a sense—and I think this is so ironic because I didn't set out to do this—is wind up vindicating what the layman thinks when he says God is both temporal and atemporal. I think that's right; He's atemporal without creation and temporal subsequent to the moment of creation.

Q. But what I would say to you is, something must be lost then, in that transition from being timeless to being temporal, because if God becomes temporal after creation or during creation, then He must no longer remember the timelessness that He had before. He can't remember it because He's no longer timeless.

A. Yes—well, that's right! This is a very odd theory, I admit. This is a very, very odd model. But when you're dealing with subjects like time and eternity, almost everything that you come up with

is odd! So what this model would require us to say is that God's omniscience in His timeless state would involve knowledge of exclusively tenseless truths, like "At $t=0$ I *create* the world," "At $t=n$ I *release* the children of Israel from bondage," "At $t=n+m$, I *become* incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth," and so forth. At the moment of creation, all of a sudden there would be a vast number of tensed propositions which would switch their truth value from being false to being true: namely, "I *shall release* the children of Israel," "I *shall become* incarnate," and so forth. Past tense propositions will become true: "I *did create* the world one minute ago," "I *did do* this or that," and so on. But there wouldn't be any past tense propositions about this timeless state before the world because it isn't in the past.

Q. What about future contingent propositions? Is God surprised at what we do?

A. No, I don't think so because I think He is omniscient. The doctrine of omniscience says that for any true proposition or fact, God knows that proposition or knows that fact, and He does not believe any false proposition. That's the traditional definition of omniscience. Since there are now truths about the future, God, as an omniscient being, must know them. And this is what the Bible affirms. The New Testament has a whole vocabulary of Greek words with the prefix *pro-* like *prognosis*, which literally means "foreknowledge," and it ascribes this to God. He foretells (*promartureo*) the future. He foreordains (*proorizo*) the future. Moreover, God's knowledge of the future is illustrated in prophecy, such as Jesus' prediction of the denial of Judas and the betrayal of Peter, highly contingent events. So I affirm that God is not surprised by what transpires in the course of the unfolding of time because He is omniscient.

Q. Where does He get this foreknowledge once He has become temporal?

A. That's a good question. There are at least two theories, I think, that you could adopt for the basis of divine foreknowledge. One would be that God simply has omniscience as an essential attribute; it is an essential attribute of God to believe only and all true propositions. He doesn't learn anything because He just has the essential property of knowing all truth, and it would be wrong to think that God has to somehow learn what He knows. The other model is called "middle knowledge," which holds that God knows what every free creature would freely do in any circumstances God might place him in. In virtue of knowing those truths and of knowing the decree of His own will to create certain circumstances and place certain creatures in them, God then knows everything that will happen. I'm persuaded that either of those two models is a viable model for divine omniscience and the middle knowledge model is especially useful in explaining God's providence over a world of free creatures.

Footnotes:

[1] Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods* (New York: Harper & Row, 1932), pp.237-8.