

The Eternity of God: Before, Above, Beyond, and Through Creation.

Abstract. There have been long-held views concerning the eternity of God that have played a major part in understanding who God is, creating paradigms that lay the groundwork for Christian (and non-Christian) doctrines. The following is an argument that God, who exhibits the attribute of eternity, exists outside of created time and space as we experience it, and yet interacts with it (an attribute herein described as, omnitemporality). God created time when he created the universal Euclidean space that is measured by it. God's omniscience and omnipresence enables Him to observe and interact with all of His creation for all time from the point of its origin to the prophesied end of the age. In such an existence man's free will is not abrogated by God's knowledge, leaving man responsible for his decisions. Yet, God knows the results of our decisions, not through absolute prediction but rather because He can already observe those results. This apologetic begins with an observation of eternity as demonstrated in His creation (Romans 1:19-20). We will then look at the theological, Christological, soteriological and escatological impact of such a thesis.

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Or

“The Epistemological Impact of an Omnitemporal Eternity on Theological, Christological, Soteriological and Eschatological Paradigms.”

“From everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.” (Psalm 90:2)

“How completely satisfying to turn from our limitations to a God who has none. Eternal years lie in his heart. For him time does not pass, it remains; and those who are in Christ share with him all the riches of limitless time and endless years.” A. W. TOZER (1897–1963)

The date was July 16, 1969. America was engaged in an international race for dominance in space exploration. Physicists and theologians alike were stimulated by the potential discoveries and opportunities that the experiences of the age would provide to their respective theological, sociological, and ideological assumptions. Following the tides of debate that preceded their historic mission, Apollo 11 astronauts Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Mike Collins departed for the moon.

The mid twentieth century saw an awakening among physicists who were uncovering some of the basic physical properties of the materials that make up the universe. The most prominent among these physicists was Albert Einstein. The most provocative of his many theories, and the one for which he will always be best known is his Theory of Relativity. Many of the components of this set of theoretical physical paradigms has since been successfully disproved, such as the existence of photons. (My

condolences to all of you Star Trek fans.) However, one important component of his theory has been successfully defended and demonstrated, and can have a profound societal, philosophical, and theological impact when considered in the context of the creation of the universe by an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal God. Einstein's principle herein presented is profound in its implication, yet simple to explain: *the rate at which one experiences the passing of time is a function of the rate of acceleration at which one is travelling.* The relative differences in the rate of the passing of time by those who experience acceleration at different rates can be derived from the now famous equation:

$$E = MC^2$$

This expression describes a functional relationship between a change in physical mass as it relates to expended energy and time. If this component of Einstein's theory can be proven, some long-held philosophical and theological positions would be seriously challenged. To those who have held to a long-believed paradigm that separates time as we experience it from eternity, their thesis would be vindicated.

Four days after the Apollo 11 astronauts departed *terra firma* they arrived at and landed on the moon where Neil Armstrong would make history as the first man ever to set foot on it. He did so, stating from script, "This is one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind." He was unaware of one of some of those leaps in understanding that were about to be made. While traveling, the scientists had difficulty synchronizing the earth-based computers with those on the space ship. Upon the arrival of the astronauts back on earth, it was verified that the computer clocks and the chronometers that they

carried were running a few milliseconds “slow.” Actually, their computer and watches were not running slow. Their timing devices were quite accurate, and were responding to one of the defensible principles of the theory of relativity: the astronauts, their space ship, and everything on it experienced a longer period of passing time than those of us who remained on the earth. They aged a few milliseconds more than we because they had experienced periods of acceleration that were at different rates than we had during the same period of time.

This report was little more than a sidebar in news coverage, but caught my attention as an inquisitive teenager who was trying to resolve conflicts between my understanding of the truths of God’s word, and the physical laws presented in my chosen interest fields of physics and astronomy. This empirical proof of the relative experience of the passing of time had already been demonstrated in many other experiments, but it was this event that put the proof in prime-time media coverage, and through what can only be described as a theophany, answered for me in the passing of a single moment what had been a large set of heavily-debated theological questions. There is undeniable evidence of a clear and simple relationship between changes in physical mass, physical energy and the passing of time. For the physicist this concept is now a non-issue, long-proven and well-understood. It has led to explanations of many of the astronomical phenomena we discovered in the last several years as we have witnessed, for example, the warping of time by the extreme gravitation of immense stars that referred to as black holes. For the theologian, this concept is equally profound and can shake the very foundations of many

time-held presuppositions: *time as we know it, understand it, and experience it is a created physical property.*

The Omnitemporality of God

“For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night” (Ps. 90:4.) “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (1 Peter 3:8.)

What are the implications of this thesis for the Christian theologian? If time is a physical property, then God created time when he created the rest of the physical universe. God is not limited by the physical properties of this creation and is as a logical consequence, neither subject to or limited by created time as we experience and know it. Having created it, He can “stand” outside of it, and interact within it whenever and wherever He chooses. “He is before time (pretemporal), He is above time (supertemporal), and He is after time (posttemporal).¹ Let us also add that God works in and through created time. Because of this latter argument God is not “timeless” as some argue, and He is not dead as some “theathanatologists” would argue.² “It is difficult to attain any conception of the mode of existence which is thus ascribed to Him. It is so different from our own. Yet, a brief consideration of what is involved in the nature of God must convince us that the idea which we express by these statements is just and true.”³ In order to identify this quality of eternity as “just and true,” let us continue to develop and refer to this resulting, eternal, attribute of God as His *omnitemporality*. God is

omnitemporal. Just as our omniscient God sees and knows all things that take place in the universe He has created, He also sees and knows all things that transpire in that creation from its revealed beginning to its prophesied end. It is as if all of the events of all time simply lay in the palm of his hand. “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.”⁴ This argument impacts our very understanding of who God is, and how he relates to us in many areas of the Christian life.

“God is an invisible, personal, and living Spirit, distinguished from all other spirits by several kinds of attributes: metaphysically God is self-existent, eternal, and unchanging.”⁵ What does it mean for God to exhibit the attribute of eternity, and what impact does his transcendence of physical time have on our understanding of God’s knowledge?

First, it should be noted that a distinction between a linear created physical time and a separate property of eternity is not a new or radical concept. Charles Hodge ascribed to an omnitemporal God when he stated, “With Him there is no distinction between the present, past, and future; but all things are equally and always present to Him.”⁶ Paul Enns states, “The eternity of God is usually understood as related to time. By definition it means that God is not limited or bound by time; with God there is no succession of events; He is above all temporal limitations.”⁷ Charles Ryrie: “He recognizes successiveness of events, but all past, present, and future events are equally vivid to Him.”⁸ These theologians base their theses, not by scientific observation of the

properties of the universe as I did in my early years, but by a far more reliable resource: God's word as revealed in scriptures.

When one looks at the positions of respected theologians, we find that this theme of the eternity of God as separate and "outside the realm" of created time is quite common. Even Saint Augustine understood this concept when he stated,

"Thou predest all things past, by the sublimity of an ever-present eternity; and surpassest all future because they are future, and when they come, they shall be past; but Thou art the Same, and Thy years fail not. Thy years neither come nor go; whereas ours both come and go, that they all may come. Thy years stand together, because they do stand; nor are departing thrust out by coming years, for they pass not away; but ours shall all be, when they shall no more be."⁹

God is above the limitations of created time just as he is above the limitations of created matter and space. However, this does not mean that God is separate from it. "With the beginning of time, God did not retire from the scene and become simply an on-looker, God watching history unfold like a spectator at a theater. God is in the play as the main character."¹⁰ This omnipresent God also has the ability to interact in our time to affect His purposes for us. "The unconditioned eternity of God brings into harmony with itself the limitations and conditions of the temporal. For time is purely relative, which eternity is not."¹¹ Certainly, when we try to compare time to this omnitemporal eternity we look through a glass darkly. We have no substantially defined paradigm or model with which to describe the properties of eternity. Though several people have been given a glimpse of that eternal state, (e.g. Daniel, Ezekial, John,) even they were limited by the

vocabulary of their day and had no succinct way to describe what it was that they were seeing. Consequently, no effort to create a definition of the properties of eternity will be attempted here.

The properties of created time and the omnitemporal eternity of God are disparate and distinct entities. However, there is a form of connection made between them; a bridge that God has been able to cross in order to interact with His creation. “No distinctions of before and after are admissible in the eternity conception, hence, we have no right to speak of time as a portion of eternity. Thus, while we maintain the essential difference between eternity and time, we at the same time affirm what may perhaps be called the affinity between them.”¹² As that affinity includes the ability of God to step into our time and interact over periods of our time, there appears to be a similar construct in eternity itself, though one that must be radically different from anything we can imagine. The entities that can pass over this “bridge” include the persons of the Trinity and God’s messengers: those angels (or demons) that also interact with God’s creation. One consistent characteristic of those that pass across this bridge is that all of these entities are supernatural, and lack temporal substance that we can clearly identify with our physical senses, leaving us a difficult task in identifying them. On many occasions God has made his angels visible by presenting them in physical form.

Christology

If we can remove the limitation of created time from God’s attributes, we can understand how God can enter into any point in time He chooses. Furthermore, there are

several Old Testament references to the Lord appearing bodily to the patriarchs, (Gideon, Jacob), and many theologians interpret these encounters as taking place between those patriarchs and Christ. If we see all of eternity as a line from infinity past to infinity future, with God walking this line along with us, such a doctrine seems preposterous. However, the scriptures describe Christ as eternal, and the agent of creation (John 1:1ff), not a product of it. As an eternal person of the Godhead, it is certainly reasonable for the Messiah to have entered into our time in His resurrected body at a point that is actually prior to the incarnation.

Still, God's purpose included a relationship with mankind that included his stepping into our time. "The Incarnation means that God took upon himself, in Christ, a human nature, which included time, space and matter. This presupposes that the divine nature is different from human nature. Part of that difference has traditionally been seen as God's not being limited by time, space and matter. Only if a bird *doesn't* swim in the ocean but flies in the air can it *enter* the ocean from above; only because God is *not* temporal, can he *become* temporal."¹³

As a human, how could Jesus predict his death? For some who place God on a time-line with us, this is a perplexing question. One theologian who ascribes to this limitation of God, Benjamin Warfield was so concerned with this argument that he places the subject of predestination and the foresight of Jesus first in his text on biblical doctrines, and in his conclusion renders the resolution of the question as hopeless.¹⁴ However, if we believe that Jesus is the eternal Christ, he shares God's omnitemporal knowledge. Just as He is able to step into history, Jesus is cognizant of the future that, as

the Christ, He also has already seen. This, of course leaves us with the paradox of Jesus testimony of ignorance concerning the day and hour of his returning (Matt. 24:35.) Somehow, only God the Father knows the moment of the end of the age.

Predestination and Free-Will

Another set of doctrines that is dramatically effected by interpretation of time, space, and eternity is that of predestination. Although the term, “predestination” is usually tied to the issue of salvation, it can refer to the broader issue of God’s plan for all of history.¹⁵ If we limit God to our time experience, God’s knowledge of the future can only be seen as omniscient prediction or total sovereign control. This issue divided the church early in the reformation when John Calvin taught a theology that all events that take place in creation are providentially planned. God’s forordination of the events of history is so absolute that those whom He has planned for election cannot resist the gospel. Shortly after Calvin’s death, Jacobus Arminius countered Calvin’s deterministic position with the teaching that every person is free to accept or reject God’s grace. This position created so much conflict in the early church that it is thought to have contributed to his declined health.¹⁶

When taken to the extreme, Calvin’s position has been used to argue against the responsibility of Christians to share the gospel. Their belief is that if God has preordained a soul’s salvation, there is no need for a missionary effort. This also implies that if a person is ordained to be lost, no amount of evangelism can make a difference. It is interesting that people could place their doctrine under such a veil when the documented

New Testament experience is almost entirely missionary-based. Such a position is inspired by a misunderstanding of God's eternity, and is damaging to the propagation of the gospel by discouraging evangelism, the very essence and commission of God's purpose for the temporal Christian experience.

When taken to a greater extreme, a fatalistic viewpoint arises that absolves mankind of all responsibility for their actions. "If all that transpires in this world is God's will, and I kill you, then Praise God, it was His will that you die. I am only God's obedient hand." This argument has been used to justify tyranny, terrorism, and violence.

Soteriology

"That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2 Timothy 1:12.)

Arminius' alternate position was not without its theological side effects. He taught that, since we have a free will to accept God's grace, we also have the opportunity to reject that grace once it has been received. He overlooked the assurance of salvation that is taught by Jesus (e.g. John, chapter 10), the apostle Paul, and many modern theologians such as C.S. Lewis, E.Y. Mullins and Hershel Hobbs. The soteriological positions of these latter theologians are largely based upon Calvinism, though they differ in the area of deterministic predestination because of their understanding of an omnitemporal God. C.S. Lewis wrote, "My free act contributes to the cosmic shape. That contribution is made in eternity or 'before all worlds'; but my consciousness of contributing reaches me at a

particular point in the time series.”¹⁷ The decisions we make are “made in eternity” by virtue of God’s habitation there. It is simply that “Man is free to choose ... but is responsible for his choices. God knows these choices beforehand but does not predetermine them.”¹⁸ Under this system of belief, we are (1) responsible for our choices, and (2) demonstrate our faithfulness to the gospel by our testimony and witness as we, like Christ, spread the good news to seek and to save the lost. The receipt of salvation by God’s grace is a free choice. Because of God’s eternity we are not puppets who respond to the puppeteer’s strings of irresistible grace, but rather free agents who can accept or reject the gospel.

God’s Immutability

When we see God’s eternity as wholly outside of created time, the doctrine of his immutability, or unchanging nature, also takes on a more distinct meaning. It is not possible for God to change during the period from the beginning of creation to the end of the age, because unlike our linear experience of day-to-day change, God resides outside of that linear limitation. God’s residence outside of the space-time continuum means that He will be the same God today as He is tomorrow, because He did not experience that change in the way we did (1 Peter 3:8.) “What we are dealing with here is the dependability of God. He will be the same tomorrow as He is today. He will act as He has promised. He will fulfill His commitments. The believer can rely upon that.”¹⁹ Consequently, since God does not change, His plan does not change. God has dealt with mankind in the same manner through the temporal ages, and will continue to do so to the end. What has been

changing has been the way that man has interpreted that plan. God has revealed himself through temporal time in a gradual and effectual manner. He introduced himself to Moses as “I AM,” a name that has gone a long way in helping us understand his eternity. He did not say, “I was the beginning and will be the end.” He said, “I AM” in a manner that transcends both the beginning and the end. Three times in the book of Revelation, God describes himself again using “I AM,” and this time with a consistent description: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Rev. 1:8, 21:6, 22:12.)

Eschatology

“For we know that if our earthly house of *this* tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ²For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: ³If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. ⁴For we that are in *this* tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life” (2 Corinthians 5:1-4.)

“What will happen to me when I die?” This question has plagued mankind since creation, and answers have served to form the basis for religions in every culture. The scripture teaches that upon death, the faithful will receive a resurrection body, one which is suited to eternity (Acts 2:31; 1 Cor. 15:42). The presence of a body implies motion, and motion implies time. We can take this speculative venture a step further if we sacrifice a little scholarship. C.S. Lewis illustrated his position on this omnitemporal,

independent time structure in his series of children's stories entitled "The Chronicles of Narnia." In this series four children were given a supernatural opportunity to travel between this present and common world and the wonders of another world named "Narnia." A portal was discovered that allowed the children to literally step between the different worlds. Each visit to the wonderland of Narnia would find them arriving there in a different time context, and the time of their return to earth was not related to the time spent on Narnia. As one reads the text, several entities in the Land of Narnia seem to be allegories of heaven. Lewis hints at this earth/heaven allegory throughout the text until the end of the series when the children die in a tragic accident and are taken quickly, and quite permanently, to Narnia. Lewis saw the passing of time in both environs, with the two being independent of one another.

The scripture also teaches that all of the dead will rise at the final judgment (Rev. 20.) However, Jesus told the thief on the cross, "today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43.) There are variant descriptions of the amount of "time" spent between death and resurrection. Models have been devised that include a waiting place, a purgatory or sheol. The necessity of such models is created by a misunderstanding of eternity. Because of the omnitemporality of eternity, though we may all die at different points along this linear, physical time line, we will all experience the resurrection immediately upon our death and "*Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord*" (1 Thessalonians 4:17.)

Conclusion.

“He who has no vision of eternity will never get a true hold of time.”
(Thomas Carlyle 1795 - 1881).

If we remove the restrictions of temporal time from our view of God, a profound series of theological models are affected. For many, some of the nagging questions concerning predestination, free-will, eschatology and other subjects can be presented with rational and sensible answers that are consistent with what God’s word describes and with what God also reveals through Creation. God is truth, and the truth of his word, and the truth concerning the creation of the cosmos are not two separate truths, but one profound expression of God’s grace. Whether the time-line of this creation has already transpired for billions of years as scientists contend, or for only a few thousand as some theologians content, God created that time-line for His purpose and pleasure. He resides in eternity, outside the limitations of created time and space, yet has ordained a bridge between them across which He and his angels can pass so that his purposes in that creation can be revealed. “Perhaps the greatest illusion of all is time, and our foolish notion that what really counts is what happens to us today or tomorrow. Soon time itself will be set aside. We will step into eternity, and then at last we will grasp what is truly real.”²⁰

*“To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!
Amen” (Jude 1:24-25.)*

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