

Dispensational Theology and Divine Temporality

Introduction

Reflections on the nature of the relationship between God and time has a long history within Christianity. From Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, to Scotus, and beyond, God's mode of temporal existence has been discussed by Christians.¹ Within the Christian tradition, God is most often considered to be timelessly eternal.² However, like other teachings, this view is not universally held. Philosophically the tide has turned with the majority of Christian philosophers maintaining that God is temporal.³

This paper embraces one of the sine qua non of dispensational theology, namely, the historical-grammatical hermeneutic⁴, which proves especially important for a consistent view of the temporal modality of God and its implications. Divine temporality will be considered in light of the ontology⁵ of the cosmos required by the two competing views: divine atemporality and

¹ Garrett J. DeWeese, *God and the Nature of Time* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 2-3. This is not to say that the temporal view of God is without a voice among Medieval theologians. John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham are two prominent theologians who's view of time laid the groundwork for embracing divine temporality (DeWeese, 185-197).

² Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 5:239.

³ Paul Helm, Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff, eds. *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 56. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995), 47.

⁵ Here is a sampling of theologians and philosophers who discuss ontology within their requisite fields of study. Wayne Grudem, "Chapter 15: Creation" in *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020); William Greenough Thayer Shedd, "Chapter 7: Creation" in *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003); Normal Geisler, "Chapter Nineteen: The Origin of Material Creation" and "Chapter Twenty: The Creation of Spiritual Creatures (Angels)" in *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis, MN; Bethany House, 2003); J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, "Chapter 8: What is Metaphysics", "Chapter 9:

divine temporality.⁶ Subsequently, this paper posits two contentions. The first contention argues that the ontology of the cosmos required for an atemporal view of God proves untenable for a biblical anthropology. The second contention argues that the ontology required of the cosmos for a temporal view of God proves tenable for a biblical anthropology. Prior to jumping into this analysis, some preliminary remarks are in order.

Preliminaries

Implications stemming from any philosophical theological study are numerous. The study of God and His relation to time and the cosmos proves to be no exception. Either position adopted has a profound effect on a myriad of doctrines. The mode of divine temporality carries important theological ramifications impacting doctrines such as omniscience, anthropology (as will be seen), divine providence, immutability, and free will to name but a few.

The study of the temporal mode of God's being entails further difficulty. One complicating element of this study is that the biblical authors do not directly articulate a clear doctrine of time.⁷ The authors did not deem it necessary to delve into details on this issue, but

General Ontology: Existence, Identity, and Reduction”, and “Chapter 10: General Ontology: Two Categories—Property and Substance” in *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2003).

⁶ Typically, God is thought of as being either atemporal or temporal categorically. William Lane Craig takes the novel approach that God is atemporal sans creation and temporal upon creation. See Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 235. While this position is, in my estimation, both biblically and logically defensible, it seems inadequate for the Trinity as relational persons. While an enjoyable discussion, this topic ventures beyond the parameters of the paper.

⁷ Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 19-20.

seem to assume that their readers would agree, even if just on key assumptions, on the basic nature of God and time.

This leads to another factor making a biblical study of time problematic. The various terms used in Hebrew and Greek themselves do not seem to provide a clear doctrine of temporality. Various biblical terms for time (e.g., *למ*, *תּוֹמ*, *אֵלֶּיךָ*, *καῖρός*, *χρόνος*, *ᾠρα*) are invoked by opposing sides for justification of the two main views.⁸ While a study of these terms is a necessary component of a thorough study on the issue of God and time, working through the numerous passages and competing interpretations falls outside the scope of this paper.⁹

The focus is on the underlying ontology necessary for each view to be sustainable. The phrase “underlying ontology” refers to the existence of the material and immaterial cosmos. The material side of the cosmos includes any and all physical matter and energy with a special focus in this paper on the human body though the physical cosmos is entailed in the discussion too. The immaterial created order refers to the existence of souls such as human souls, angels/demons, and even the real though seemingly immaterial heavens. The underlying ontology of the cosmos (i.e., the material cosmos including material side of human persons) proves significant when evaluating the two main views of time.

Instead of attempting to evaluate the merits of the two views of temporality through appeals to specific temporal terms used in Scripture or passages that seem to address God’s

⁸ Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 20.

⁹ While a study of these terms is outside the scope of this paper, they do need to be incorporated within the broader study of a biblical view on temporality. Some good sources include DeWeese, “Chapter 4: The Evidence from Scripture” in *God and the Nature of Time*; James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London; SCM Press, 1962). Further temporal word studies are also found in biblical dictionaries that focus on the Hebrew and Greek.

relation to time, the focus will be on the underlying ontology of the cosmos necessary for the two competing views to be valid. Stated differently, this paper focuses on God's relation to time with the cosmos and not sans the cosmos.¹⁰

What Is Time?

Two rival theories of time undergird competing views of God and His relation to time. The two theories are commonly referred to as the A-theory of time and the B-theory of time.¹¹ The A-theory, also known as the dynamic theory of time, is the commonsense or normal view of time people generally hold. On this account, the future does not yet exist, the present does exist, and the past no longer exists. This means that temporal becoming "is a genuine feature of the world and not merely of our psychology."¹² This view makes the passage of events and change over time ontological realities. For the purposes of this paper, the underlying ontology of the A-theory of time can be thought of in the following manner. People who lived long ago, such as in the days of Jesus, are no longer physically alive. The physical cosmos that existed during Jesus' day no longer exists exactly as it did back then because everything has gone through changes (e.g., trees once alive have died, new trees exist, buildings exist now that did not before, the planets have changed position repeatedly, etc.). The previous forms of material existence are no longer.

¹⁰ While this paper argues that God is temporal, it will be made clear that time should not be thought of as a property of God. Instead, time (series of events) derives from God being active. As such, time falls under the full control of God. If God ceases to do anything, then time ceases. If God does something, then temporality results.

¹¹ DeWeese, *God and the Nature of Time*, 2-4. Some claim that time does not exist, but they are in the minority and this view is not attended to here.

¹² DeWeese, 15.

A similar point applies to the future cosmos. How the future world will be (e.g., people to be born that do not exist yet, forests that will burn and others that will grow anew, etc.) does not exist yet. The future status of these things is “not yet” but will come about as God guides them.¹³ All of this aligns with temporal becoming.

The B-theory, also known as the static theory of time, proves far different. The B-theory of time posits time as a fourth dimension of the cosmos.¹⁴ On this account, all of reality exists “on an ontological par.”¹⁵ There is no past per se. Nor is there a future per se. Instead, the entire cosmos is thought of as existing simultaneously from its inception to its end. The first day of creation is just as real, ontologically speaking, as you are today. As will be made evident, the ontology of the cosmos underlying the B-theory of time results in the genuine existence of all past, present, and future states of affairs. This means that the material cosmos of two thousand years ago, as well as all human persons, currently (simultaneously) exist just as we do today.

These two theories of time each assume an underlying ontology of the cosmos that is diametrically opposed to one another. These ontologies must be accounted for in our analysis of God’s mode of temporal existence. Importantly, there is large agreement that time is a succession. However, as will be made evident, the manner in which this is construed within the

¹³ As will be evident later in the paper, in no fashion does the view being proposed endorse or lead to Open Theism. God’s omniscience is thorough including knowledge of all future, present, and past aspect of His created universe. By nature of His being He knows that is possible to be known.

¹⁴ The B-theory of time is the reigning model of temporality within physics and provides the bread and butter for Hollywood sci-fi movies. The ability to travel back in time or into the future rests squarely on the B-theory of time for the cosmos.

¹⁵ DeWeese, *God and the Nature of Time*, 15.

two theories varies greatly. With the essence of the two rival theories of time presented, it is now possible to consider the main options for the relation between God, the cosmos, and time.

Four Ways to Depict God, The Cosmos, and Time.

Four different positions are possible in relation to God, the cosmos, and temporality: (1) God and the cosmos are both atemporal, (2) God is temporal and the cosmos is atemporal, (3) God is atemporal and the cosmos is temporal, and (4) God and the cosmos are both temporal. The first two options will be looked at briefly and the final two will be considered more fully with majority of the analysis spent on option three.

God and the Cosmos Are Both Atemporal

The view that God and the cosmos are both atemporal does not hold much merit for biblical Christianity. In fact, this view comports with Baruch Spinoza's pantheistic views. God, being identified with nature, entails the same temporal features as the material universe.¹⁶ As such, God is not a transcendent, personal creator who forgives sin, and brings salvation to the lost. This view of God and the cosmos essentially amounts to naturalism. Most naturalists embrace the B-theory of time due to its acceptance within physics, which then translates into (the Spinoza) God and the cosmos both being atemporal. For our purposes, a naturalist view will not be considered here.

¹⁶ Walter Sundberg, "Spinoza, Baruch (1632–77)," in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor A. Hart (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2000), 527. Logos Bible Software.

God Is Temporal and The Cosmos Is Atemporal

The option that God is temporal, and the cosmos is atemporal does not seem to be embraced by any notable group or individual. However, it is one of the logically possible options. On this account, God would experience a succession of events while the cosmos would have no such experience. On a biblical view, this position is out of sync with Scripture. God would undergo temporal succession, which is consistent with some views of Scripture, but the created order would be without succession. This view would be hard to defend biblically and, as far as this writer can find, lacks a proponent articulating this position (Gen. 1:1; Job 38:4; Gal. 4:4-5).

God Is Atemporal and The Cosmos Is Temporal

The position positing God as atemporal (timeless) and the cosmos as temporal is often considered the orthodox view within Christianity as a whole and even evangelical Christianity in particular.¹⁷ Two common attempts to synthesize God's atemporal mode with a temporal cosmos need to be considered.

Generally, this view claims that God is atemporal because He undergoes no succession and that the created order is temporal for it undergoes succession. This view of God and the cosmos are commonly accounted for in one of two ways: 1) God sees everything in one eternal now or 2) God timelessly interacts with the temporal cosmos. With that said, the first

¹⁷ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 5:260.

contention is restated: the ontology of the cosmos required for an atemporal view of God proves untenable for a good biblical anthropology.

God sees everything in one eternal "now"

In general, an atemporal view posits that God experiences no succession of events such that He has no differentiated past, present, or future. Instead, God sees the entire cosmos in one undifferentiated moment. This results in God being able to know all true claims about the cosmos.

Theologian Thayer Shedd states it this way, “. . . God knows a succession instantaneously and simultaneously. God sees the end from the beginning, and hence for him there is no interval or sequence between the end and the beginning.”¹⁸ Some Christian philosophers agree with this claim. Philosopher Brian Leftow posits, “The claim that God is timeless entails that God ‘sees’ all at once all temporal events that He ever sees. For if He did not, there would have to be real succession in His experience. He would first see one set of events and then see another, and so His life would have past and future phases and would be temporal.”¹⁹ On this atemporal account, divine omniscience and divine timelessness are intricately linked. God knows all events instantly and simultaneously. He sees the end from the beginning (omniscience) with no interval or sequence of events (timelessness). All of reality is,

¹⁸ William Greenough Thayer Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 281.

¹⁹ Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 217. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv5qdh70>.

in essence, one cosmic now or moment for the Godhead. Because it is all before Him, He knows there is to know of the cosmos.

To be fair, Shedd admits difficulty with understanding this position.²⁰ Indeed, there are aspects of many doctrines that are hard to fully comprehend (e.g., the Trinity) this side of heaven. Yet, we press on.

Ontological ramifications of divine timelessness

An espoused biblical worldview, with its constituent parts, needs to be consistent with Scripture, but also with God's creation. God would not communicate a worldview inconsistent with His created order.²¹ With this principle in mind, one key component of divine timelessness, namely the underlying ontology of the cosmos, seems to be understandable enough as to render this view untenable.

Divine Timelessness and Anthropology

Divine timelessness carries with it seemingly unavoidable ontological ramifications. This is due specifically to divine timelessness holding that God *sees* the entirety of the created order in an undifferentiated now or eternal moment. To be sure, this divine seeing of the cosmos should not be understood in anthropomorphic terms. Christian theologians and philosophers do not intend that cosmic eyes exist that are looking down upon the cosmos from some divine vantage point. To be as charitable as possible, the seeing should be understood generally in

²⁰ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 283.

²¹ This principle is what gives strength to scientific challenges leveled at Christianity and why they need a quality answer. However, in the case of this study, the focus is on the ontological implications entailed within the competing views of God and time rather than with science.

terms of some direct or indirect awareness of that which exists.²² However, if the entirety of the cosmos, from inception to forever in the future,²³ is *before* (genuinely existing in the presence of) God for Him to see or know, then significant ontological and associated theological problems arise.

If God sees the entirety of the cosmos and all people as well as all events in one cosmic moment,²⁴ then all people exist (ontologically) before God from their beginning to their end.²⁵ With the requisite technology, it would be conceivable for someone to travel back in time and revisit his 6th birthday party. He would literally see himself with friends, assuming they showed up, enjoying the event. A half-hour later, he could travel back to his fifth birthday party and see what was going on, and then to his fourth birthday party, and so on. What is more, he would be able to travel ahead to see his future birthday parties.

Herein lies an ontological problem. Each time this person sees himself he would, necessarily, be seeing another physical version. In order for him to see, even theoretically, himself at a different life event there must be at least two different selves for this seeing process to transpire. If he, in one body, saw himself in another body on his sixth birthday, then

²² Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 218-220. The point being that we cannot expect any view to provide clarity of exactly how God goes about knowing, but only that He does know. The phrase “direct and indirect awareness” is intended to be general enough to allow for any biblically consistent view on the matter. The specifics of how are not central to the thesis of this paper.

²³ One challenge revolves around avoiding temporally loaded terms for the atemporal position. Even if some temporal terms are used or some temporality is implied due to linguistic preferences, the vantage point of God on this view should be thought of as atemporal.

²⁴ On this account, the seeing or knowing of the entirety of the cosmos would entail all material (physical) and immaterial (i.e., spiritual) realities and truths.

²⁵ Biblically speaking a person’s life does not “end” per se, but only the bodily life sees an end (death albeit temporarily). Used here, end simply refers to when a person dies physically though the same problems that will arise for a person’s physical life also apply to the afterlife.

he would be seeing a bodily self different than his current self. If he traveled further back, then he would see yet another bodily self on his fifth birthday. This point alone only begins to touch the significance of the challenge regarding a biblical anthropology. If there are different bodies for birthday, then there must also be different bodies for every day of his existence. It necessarily follows, then, that there are different bodies for each hour of his existence. In fact, there must be, ontologically speaking, a different body for *every single instant of his existence* for God to see so that there is something there at that moment to be seen. If he does not exist ontologically for God to see, then this depiction of God's seeing is false. In order for this view to be true, this person must exist at every moment which God sees his existence as real.

Clearly this results in an unusual biblical anthropology. Which one of these bodies entails the individual? The one viewing the others? The one at the sixth birthday party? Fifth birthday party? A historical-grammatical reading of Scripture teaches that a person is destined to die once and then face judgment (Heb. 9:27). Yet, if divine atemporality implies that the entirety of creation is literally before God, then every person has a different body for every instant of existence including various bodies when facing judgement. This means there are a multitude of bodies beginning at conception, throughout one's life, and even different bodies at the judgment (assuming a judgement where the body rose from the dead and was reunited with the person, Heb. 9:27; Rev. 20:11-15).

This ontological problem would extend to our Lord too. If the entirety of the cosmos genuinely exists before God from beginning to end, then so does the entirety of the life of our Lord. Mary is currently (technically, simultaneously) pregnant with our Lord (Matt. 1:18), giving birth to our Lord (Matt. 1:25-2:1), and searching for our Lord (Luke 2:41-46). Jesus is also

currently being flogged (Matt. 27:26), suffering on the cross (Matt. 27:35), residing in the tomb (Matt. 27:59-60), and rising from the dead in bodily form (Matt. 28:6-9).

Claiming that Jesus literally died and rose from the dead proves highly problematic for He remains in several states of existence including being born, ministering, being crucified, dying, and rising from the dead. A multi-state status of the Messiah runs counter to a historical-grammatical hermeneutic that provides the biblical concept of a completed, once for all salvation by the One no longer on the cross (Rom. 6:10; 1 Pet. 3:18; Heb. 9:27-28).

William Lane Craig notes that the atemporal view leads to a unique outcome for human life that can be illustrated as flip book animation.²⁶ Imagine drawing images of a person on consecutive pieces of paper. The images depict him robbing a store with each consecutive image in a slightly different position, followed by another, and another. Once the drawings are complete, the pages are quickly flipped giving the impression that the individual ran into the store, robbed the store at gunpoint, and then left. This is what the numerous bodies of people constitutes on the atemporal view; many bodies in various positions only slightly different than the preceding position which give the impression of movement, but without actual movement. While proponents of divine atemporality would reject the implications, merely denying the conflict or saying it must work differently does not address the ontological problems faced on this view. They need clear and specific answers, especially for those committed to the historical-grammatical hermeneutic.

²⁶ Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 60-62.

To press the problem one step further, the bodies necessary for every instant of existence is not the most challenging aspect of this view. Since there must be a myriad of physical bodies from the beginning of a person's life to the end with no genuine physical action, the sensation of living in the cosmos must be relegated to one's soul sliding down the various bodies making it feel as if the actions transpire. This soul-slide amounts to experiences grounded in the illusion of living in a physical universe. The incarnation of the Logos ends up being merely the second person of the Trinity sliding down a series of bodies which culminates in heaven.²⁷ Clearly, a historical-grammatical reading of Scripture provides no basis for accepting this ontology of our Lord or of humans. However, a common reply to this dilemma must be addressed.

Human Perspective

A common reply to the challenge of one's entire life existing before God claims that the ontological problem which lays the ground for soul-slide is merely due to our human perspective.²⁸ God remains atemporal, but still knows things that have succession such as the cosmos. The real problem is simply that as humans we have a hard time comprehending or

²⁷ This problem can be extended to the soul as well since God would have to see a person fully as he/she is which includes a soul. That being the case, a different soul would be necessary for each instant of existence. Further theological and moral problems arise when it comes to human responsibility and being born again.

²⁸ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 5:261. Henry says that God's acts are temporal from our perspective. However, this perspectivism underlies the challenge being address. Naturally, Henry does not speak specifically of multiple bodies existing or of soul-slide, but that is part of the problem. Appeals to the human perspective tend to brush aside inconvenient implications.

understanding how God knows everything from His divine vantagepoint. On this formulation, God remains atemporal, but knows everything with temporal succession.²⁹

In reply it needs to be noted that it is not clear exactly what this reply means. If the cosmos is all, literally, before the Lord then the ontological challenges of a multitude of bodies existing for any given person remains. Stating that God simply knows everything that has temporal succession while Himself remaining atemporal does not eliminate this problem. The challenge needs to be directly addressed.

What is more, if this ontological problem is merely a human perspective issue, then it seems that Scripture supports or promotes falsehoods. Straightforward biblical anthropology teaches that a person is an embodied soul that can be separated from the body at death but also that both will be reunited in the future (2 Cor. 5:8; 1 Thess. 4:14-18). Scripture does not teach that we have a different body for every instant of existence upon which our soul slides mimicking morally good and morally bad acts while lacking genuine moral substance.

Finally, it is not all together clear what temporal succession is on this account. Does temporal succession entail things coming into and then going out of existence (e.g., the past no longer exists, the present does exist, and the future will exist, but does not yet)? If temporal succession does not include things coming into and going out of existence, then Christ is currently on the cross (for He never goes out of existence). If temporal succession does include things coming into and going out of existence, then the conflict does not appear to be human perception but how this coming and going into and out of existence comports with

²⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 205.

atemporality. God cannot both have the entirety of the cosmos before Him and not have the entirety of the cosmos before Him. We must settle on one side of the ontological equation: either Jesus rose again and there is no version of His body remaining on the cross or His physical resurrection from the dead is just human perspective and there are actually various bodies of Jesus still existing including numerous ones on the cross.

Another view of the relationship between God's atemporal mode and the cosmos comes into play; maybe God timelessly acts within the temporal cosmos. To this account we now turn.

God acts timelessly within a temporal universe

Wayne Grudem holds that God created the universe *ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing).³⁰ This creation, according to Grudem, entails not only the material realm (mountains, animals, man), but also the spiritual (immaterial) realm such as angels, other heavenly beings, as well as heaven where God exists.³¹ In other words, Grudem embraces a literal understanding of the created cosmos, namely, that there exists both material and immaterial (spiritual) aspects to God's creation.

It is within this ontological setting in mind that Grudem endorses the view that God is timeless yet acts within the temporal universe. In his words,

However, this [atemporal view of God] should never cause us to think that God does not see events *in time* and act *in time*, but just the opposite: God is the eternal Lord and Sovereign over time and over history, and he sees it more clearly and acts in it more decisively than any other. But once we have said that, we still must affirm that these

³⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 338.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 341.

verses speak of God's relationship to time in a way that we do not and cannot experience. God's experience of time is not just a patient endurance through eons of endless duration, but he has a *qualitatively different* experience of time than we do. This is consistent with the idea that in his own being, God is timeless; he does not experience a succession of moments. Before God created the world, there was no passage of time, but God timelessly existed.³²

Grudem goes on to say, "It is evident throughout Scripture that God acts within time and acts differently at different points in time."³³ On Grudem's account of divine timelessness, God acts within time but remains timeless.³⁴ Yet acting in time is exactly what temporality seems to be.³⁵ More precisely, acting (doing one thing and then another) is a succession of events which, by definition, is time even on Grudem's account, which will be seen.³⁶

Granting that God acts in time while also claiming that God is atemporal attempts to marry two diametrically opposed positions. Conceiving of an atemporal being who acts in time proves paradoxical to the breaking point. Either God acts, and is thus temporal, or He refrains from acting, and is thus atemporal.

Couching the dispute in theologically robust terms (e.g., eternal Lord, Sovereign over time, sees more it more clearly, acts in it more decisively, etc.) tends to cloud rather than clarify the issue, thereby doing little to resolve the underlying conflict. The ontology of the cosmos that God created must be taken into account on either perspective of divine temporality. This ontology sheds significant light on the legitimacy of the competing views of divine temporality.

³² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 202.

³³ *Ibid.*, 205.

³⁴ Grudem is not alone, of course. See Henry, 5:274.

³⁵ This would be using common vernacular. More properly, God's acting merits Him being temporal. More on this below.

³⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

Grudem's view does not seem to do justice to its implications which leads into his understanding of time.

Grudem appears to provide a conflicting view of time. When discussing time, he initially expresses it in terms of eternity, "God's eternity may be defined 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 he acts in time.*"³⁷ God is thought of as seeing all events "equally vividly", but Grudem avoids taking into consideration the ontology of the cosmos, which undercuts the feasibility of this view. The untenable ontological implications noted above plague this understanding of eternity and time.

Additionally, Grudem's view provides little to clarify time. At one-point he states, "When God began to create the universe, time began, and there began to be a succession of moments and events one after another."³⁸ Here Grudem's view of time takes on two legs: moments and events. The first leg is that of moments. A substantial problem exists by equating time with moments. A moment is a vague, unspecified measure of time and not time itself. Just as "a little longer" is a vague, unspecified measure of length, or even time when saying you need a little longer to submit your paper to a conference, the "little longer" is not length itself. Length refers to how extended through space something is. A moment is an amount of time, but not time itself. In other words, a moment is an unspecified short interval of time, but still does not identify what time is, thereby resulting in a problematic definition by using this term.

³⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 199.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 200.

Grudem believes that time was created along with the cosmos. He appeals to physics for support, “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.”³⁹ He is not alone viewing time as being created. Many theologians hold that time is some type of created entity.⁴⁰ In one way or another, many embrace time as a creation of God.

It is not obvious, though, that time is a created thing or sphere (or whatever it is as a creation). In fact, this is the question at hand that must be addressed. Herein lies a central problem for this view of time. If time must occur with space and the physical cosmos, then time is a creation of God. But then, what is time? If time is identical to the physical world, and Grudem does not suggest this, then saying this world is physical and temporal would be redundant. If time is intricately related to the physical world, as Grudem implies, then time would not be possible without the physical cosmos. However, as Christians, there are good biblical grounds for believing that time is not reliant upon the material cosmos. A historical-grammatical reading of Scripture reveals people experiencing temporal sequence during disembodied states without the physical cosmos (Rev. 4:8; 6:10). Time need not be thought of as necessarily tied to the material universe. In fact, doing so proves biblically inconsistent.

Another problem with Grudem’s construal of time has to do with his appeal to physics. He appears to believe that physics provides a basis for claiming time is a creation of God when saying, “The study of physics tells us that matter and time and space must all occur together: if

³⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

⁴⁰ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 5:265.

there is no matter, there can be no space or time either.”⁴¹ While the study of physics is important, a significant problem underlies this view. Besides the fact that time is not physical and thus cannot be studied or justified by physics, the majority of physicists assume a B-theory of time regarding the cosmos.⁴²

The B-theory of time presents every moment, so to speak, from the beginning of the material universe to the end as existing fully and simultaneously. His appeal to physics actually undermines his view of time for the cosmos which, for Grudem, includes genuine temporal becoming.⁴³ Yet temporal becoming isn’t possible on the theory of time widely embraced within physics, namely, the B-theory of time (atemporality). The appeal to a modern physics understanding leads to both God and the cosmos being atemporal; a view consistent with the second view briefly addressed above resulting in Spinoza’s God and naturalism. Even if Grudem were to correctly reject the majority assumption in physics about the nature of time for the cosmos, he provides no warrant for accepting his claim as true. Appeals to passages such as Genesis 1:1 assume his conclusion, that time is created with the cosmos, when that is the

⁴¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

⁴² DeWeese, *God and the Nature of Time*, 65.

⁴³ Temporal becoming refers to the changes something undergoes through the flow of time. For instance, an apple begins small and then becomes (temporal becoming) larger, sweeter, and then ripe. If the ripe apple is left alone, it will then progress to being spoiled or rotten. In the past, the apple was small, and, over time, it grew larger, then it became sweeter, then ripe, then it turns rotten. The first state turns into another state (ontologically speaking) and then into another. Significantly, the former state of existence no longer exists, the present state of the apple does exist, and the future state of the apple is yet to exist.

question to be answered. He also appears to overlook biblical evidence to the contrary as previously noted.⁴⁴

With that said, Grudem also equates time with a series of events, which seems correct. This is evident in the second leg of his statement, “When God began to create the universe, time began, and there began to be a succession of moments and events one after another.”⁴⁵ A succession of event does seem to be what time is. However, once this definition is accepted, if God acts within human history, He is temporal, which is the position Grudem seeks to deny. The result is that Grudem remains inconsistent on his use of the term time. This inconsistency comes out in statements such as the following:

Indeed, the repeated emphasis on God’s ability to predict the future in the Old Testament prophets requires us to realize that God predicts his actions at one point in time and then carries out his actions at a later point in time. And on a larger scale, the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation is God’s record of the way he has acted over time to bring redemption to his people.⁴⁶

Grudem provides a quality biblical view of God acting over time and throughout redemptive history. He acknowledges that God acts at certain times and then acts at other times. This construal is awash with temporality for God. Accepting these temporal acts of God as biblical truths and then denying temporality regarding God seems logically incongruent and unnecessary. If Gruden accepts the A-theory of time for the cosmos, namely, that our past ontologically no longer exists, the present does exist, and the future is yet to exist, then He would need to give up His claim that God sees the entire cosmos before Him. This is due to the

⁴⁴ To be fair, Grudem’s systematic theology is not designed to address every aspect of God and temporality. The point made here is simply that there appear to be significant theological truths that call into question his construal of divine temporality.

⁴⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

fact the totality the created order (from inception through its future) would not be before God to be seen.

Rather than resolving the issue, this very conflict is embraced by Grudem when he says of God, “Therefore he can see all events in time equally vividly, yet he also can see events in time and act in time.”⁴⁷ He portrays God as over and above time (atemporal) yet as one who acts in time (temporal) throughout human history. The ontological conflict remains; either the cosmos exists in all of its fullness from its creation throughout its future or only the “present” cosmos exists. However, the ontological nature of the cosmos seems to imply a significant conflict when positing God as being atemporal with a temporal universe.

God and The Cosmos Are Both Temporal

Prior to looking at the final option, namely, that God and the cosmos are both temporal, it is good to revisit the second contention. This contention argues that the ontology of the cosmos required for a temporal view of God proves tenable for a biblical anthropology.

Some distinctions are in order. By saying God is temporal, I do not intend that there is an attribute of temporality which is part of God’s nature in the same manner that omnipotence, omniscience, or holiness are part of His nature. Temporality does not seem to be an attribute of God in an essential or non-essential predication sense. Instead, the claim “God is temporal” should be taken to read that temporality results from divine activity. In this sense, temporality is a secondary property or one that is derivative in nature. Temporality is contingent upon the actions of God. This means that temporality is the result of (derived from) divine activity such as

⁴⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 204.

creation ex nihilo (Gen. 1:1), sustaining the universe in existence (Col. 1:17), forgiving sin (1 Jo. 1:5-10), redeeming a person (1 Pet. 1:17-19), bringing about the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18), the return of Christ (Rev. 1:7), and the great white throne judgement to come (Rev. 20:11-15). In this way, time refers to a series of events brought about by God Himself (as Grudem properly notes in the second half of his use of the term time⁴⁸).

A series of events in this sense means that events and their associated effects come to pass. That is, there is a point when the actions and resulting effects do not exist, then they come into existence, then they go out of existence.⁴⁹ As such, God does experience temporal succession because the acts He engages in also go through succession. However, I suggest that time does not constrain God because it is not a part of His being. Instead, time results from Him being active in and throughout His created order.⁵⁰

If time is a series of events, then God performing one event followed by another event strongly implies temporality in relation to Him. This includes any interaction within the Godhead. If one person of the Godhead does something, such as send His son on a mission, and another person of the Godhead were to engage in this mission, then temporality seems exists between the members of the Trinity (Matt. 3:16-17; John 3:16).

⁴⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

⁴⁹ There are select exceptions such as angels and humans. While there was a time when each did not exist and then came into existence, it seems from Scripture that each will be sustained in existence for the remainder of eternity (Dan. 7:18; Rev. 22:5). This eternal existence, beginning at their inception, contrasts with the inevitable, future non-existence of the material cosmos (Rev. 21:1).

⁵⁰ The focus in this paper remains on God temporal mode with creation. The issue of His temporal mode sans creation is for another time.

Viewing God as temporal avoids the ontological problems regarding the ontology of the cosmos that comes with positing God as atemporal. If God is temporal, then He knows everything (omniscience) about the created order due to His nature of being all-knowing.⁵¹ The created order does not need to exist in an all-encompassing moment for Him to know all that there is to know about it. People do not literally exist before God from their inception throughout eternity. Instead, they exist in the present (due to God sustaining their existence, quite temporally it may be added), but not in the past nor yet in the future.

No soul-slide is implied because the numerous bodies do not exist before God. The incarnation takes on a literal sense as does the resurrection and ascension of our Lord (Matt. 28:1-7; Acts 1:9-11). The underlying ontology of Jesus also implies the non-existent of His past body and life as well as His actual resurrection from the dead once for all (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 9:27-28). There is no series of material bodies that currently exist in the past for the Lord or anyone else.

These biblically grounded, ontological views can be taken as proper, genuine representations of reality. There is no need to relegate these core issues to mere human perception to avoid unwelcome ontological or theological implications. God has acted throughout human history, a history that no longer exists.⁵² He acts presently within human

⁵¹ To be clear, divine omniscience should be understood in the fullest, most robust sense of the term. God knows all past, present, and future truths (e.g., events, persons, etc.) that can possibly be known about the cosmos. Additionally, divine omniscience also entails things and events that never come about but could have if God decided to bring them about.

⁵² The temporality of God can easily be further distinguished for each member of the Trinity. Each person of the Godhead acts throughout salvation history, thereby strongly implying temporality for each. As a brief example, God the Father rescues saints and transfers them into the kingdom of His Son

lives and will act in the future which does not exist yet but will. In fact, it could properly be said that the cosmos enjoys temporality because God is temporal. Our temporality, then, reflects God for it means God is active just as we are designed to be.⁵³

The underlying ontology of the cosmos for a temporal view of God also allows for a historical-grammatical hermeneutic regarding anthropology. People really are non-existent, then come into existence (Gen. 27, 18, 22; Jer. 1:5). It would not be possible to take a time machine and revisit a previous birthday party because that event, and associated people, no longer exist. When it comes to salvation, people are genuinely unregenerated and then regenerated by the Holy Spirit when they trust the Lord (Titus 3:1-8). This regenerative act in an individual's life would be at a different time than another person's regeneration, thereby signifying temporal action on God's part.

Conclusion

This paper considers God's mode of temporality in relation to the ontology of the cosmos. The underlying ontology of the cosmos on an atemporal view of God is often presented as all before Him. This rendition of the cosmos creates significant theological problems regarding biblical anthropology that prove untenable for a literal reading of Scripture.

(Col. 1:13; Titus 3:6). God the Holy Spirit, who was poured out on believers by the Father (Titus 3:6), carries out the washing of rebirth and renewal of a believer (Titus 3:5-6). These works are accomplished due to the Son of God living, dying on the cross, rising from the dead, and appearing to many (1 Cor. 15:3-8). Each of these acts within the temporal universe, accomplished by the persons of the Trinity, happened at a different times.

⁵³ This view closely aligns with what is known as omnitemporality. For more on omnitemporality, see Garrett DeWeese in Ganssle, *God and Time*, 56.

A key problem for a biblical anthropology is the necessity of a different body for every instant of existence for a person.

Claims that God created time also prove problematic in that time does not seem to be the time of thing that is created. Instead, time is a series of events and primarily the result of divine events. Temporality proves to be no limitation on God's nature for it is not part of His nature per se. Instead, time as a series of events is the result of divine activity. Rather than seeing God through human temporality, it is better to view humans through divine temporality; human temporality and the temporality of the cosmos derive from an active, and thus temporal God, who acts within and on behalf of His creation. In this way, divine temporality proves tenable for an anthropology that is consistent with a historical-grammatical hermeneutic.

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