

IS IT TIME TO CHANGE? OPEN THEISM AND THE DIVINE TIMELESSNESS DEBATE

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The recent popularity of Open Theism in evangelical circles has raised questions regarding the traditional doctrine of divine eternity, timelessness, or atemporality. The questions necessitate a three-part investigation of the subject. Part one investigates the present status of temporality studies which define time as either tenseless or dynamic. Part two compares the temporal position with the atemporal. The classical position has been that God is timeless, but some recent evangelical scholars have come to view God as a temporal being, with some others theorizing that He is both temporal and atemporal. The temporal position criticizes atemporalism in three ways: (1) the Bible presents God as a temporal being; (2) the modern consensus is that God is temporal; (3) atemporality is a result of the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian doctrine; (4) the idea of a timeless God is incoherent. In each case, the criticisms prove to be invalid. Part three examines positions that attempt to maintain temporality and atemporality simultaneously, but the composite approach proves to be nothing but another way of stating the atemporal position. A successful defense of the atemporal position proves Open Theism to be an unorthodox version of theism that should be rejected.

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No generation in Christian history has debated like ours about whether God is timeless or whether he has unending duration, that is, whether temporal existence extends interminably forward and backward.¹

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¹Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority, Vol. V: The God Who Stands and Stays, Part One* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1982) 241.

Significant portions of Process Theology have been imported into evangelical thinking through the medium of Open or Freewill Theism. Though Open Theism claims to be significantly different from Process Theology, enough similarities exist to make the astute observer suspicious. In keeping with postmodern maxims regarding tolerance, most critics of Open Theism have attempted to see both positives and negatives in their analyses. This is in many ways very commendable. However, the result has been widespread confusion throughout the evangelical camp with regard to several traditional attributes of God.² Some were already deemed redundant or misleading. Others were subjected to new and more intense analysis than previously accorded. The purpose of this article is to look at one of these divine attributes, divine eternity or timelessness, and to ascertain whether it needs to be rejected, redefined, or reaffirmed in light of recent philosophical and exegetical contributions.

The nature of this doctrine is such that for the most part it is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. A major argument made by Open Theism is that all theological camps modify omniscience and immutability in some very noticeable ways. Open theists then claim that they are simply taking those necessary adjustments to a new but still orthodox level. Divine eternity may not be susceptible to such arguments. There do not seem to be any partially timeless constructs that are both biblical and coherent. If this doctrine and its implications for divine omniscience can be established as a necessary truth, it will certainly follow that Open Theism is outside the parameters of acceptable theism.

Divine eternity, timelessness, or atemporality goes back to Augustine and was later embedded into classical theism by Boethius, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas. It was initially introduced as a logical concomitant of impassibility, immutability, and omniscience.³ Even though it is difficult to segregate these divine attributes, because

²Ronald Nash lists eight core attributes that form classical theism “(1) pure actuality, (2) immutability, (3) impassibility, (4) timelessness, (5) simplicity, (6) necessity, (7) omniscience, and (8) omnipotence” (Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], 20). He discards simplicity and impassibility and suggests that Process Theology and Open Theism want to alter immutability, timelessness, and omniscience substantially.

³Early classical theists would argue that all the essential attributes are logically interdependent in such a way that a denial of even one is a denial of the existence of God. “Is God’s timelessness—the traditional orthodox understanding of divine eternity—then a necessary truth? Is it a predication logically implicit in the very idea of God? Is it known to man intuitively, independently of and prior to special Judeo-Christian revelation? Augustine and Anselm apparently thought so; man, they said, has innate knowledge of God by creation. God is identical with each of his attributes, they taught, and since each attribute entails every other, to forfeit any one divine perfection would logically erase God. In this view God’s timeless eternity is not a contingent attribute; God cannot have temporal duration and yet be God” (Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* 259). However, though recent theists have tended to combine the essential attributes somewhat more loosely, there is universal acknowledgement that any change to one attribute does have varying ripple effects for at least some of the other attributes. Nash suggests that because some of these attributes are seriously compromised, an all or nothing approach may be the Achilles’ heel of classical theism. This approach must be abandoned or the likelihood exists that Process

Open Theism has questioned the traditional understanding of the whole cluster, this article will attempt to deal with timelessness *accepting* Open Theism's reformulations and rejections regarding omniscience and immutability.⁴ If God's eternity can be entailed without appealing to the classical understanding of these associated attributes, it should follow that Open Theism has failed in *all* of its present reformulations.

Additionally, the issue has been somewhat complicated by several recent writings which have tried to integrate the advantages of temporality with those of atemporality. These posit God to be experientially temporal but ontologically atemporal. Most view this temporality as a voluntary limitation but others argue that this is a necessary circumstance grounded in the act of creating a temporal universe. Such a God is exactly what Open Theism craves. Since most open theists argue for a voluntary limitation⁵ of omniscience, a voluntary limitation to finite time would most certainly strengthen their argument regarding God's knowledge of the future.

Hence, the purpose of this article is to establish atemporality in a strong sense as an entailment of orthodox theism. In order to accomplish that purpose it is first necessary to survey the present status of temporality studies. Part two will attempt to set forth the case for a necessarily atemporal deity. Part three will endeavor to quiet all claims to a bi-temporal deity. If this can be demonstrated without appealing to omniscience, immutability, and impassibility, then a great portion of the open theist's argument will be mooted since many of the arguments used against omniscience and immutability are also used against atemporality.⁶

Part One: God and Time

God's timelessness is not the easiest attribute to define, much less to require

Theism will win the war of *attributology*. "It is possible to develop mediating concepts of God that can avoid the major difficulties of the static God of the Thomistic theism and the finite god of Process Theology" (Nash, *Concept of God* 22).

⁴"Closely related to those of immutability and impassibility are the questions of God's eternity and his relationship to time. Open Theism challenges the traditional notion that God is beyond time or timeless. According to Pinnock, the doctrine of God's timelessness threatens the biblical teaching that God is 'an agent who works sequentially in time.' To the contrary explains Pinnock, 'God experiences temporal passage, learns new facts when they occur and changes plans in response to what humans do'" (Ron Highfield, "The Function of Divine Self-Limitation in Open Theism: Great Wall or Picket Fence," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 [2002]:281).

⁵"DSL [Divine Self Limitation] pervades open theist literature and plays a crucial role there. It functions as a kind of 'Great Wall' to protect Open Theism from being overrun by process theism" (ibid., 285-86).

⁶The most important of these arguments is the appearance of temporality induced by a "straightforward" reading of many narrative texts. If one is required to accept the anthropomorphic character of so-called temporality texts, it seems an argument from the greater to the lesser that one must also ascribe the same to change-of-mind texts.

in a strong sense. There is certainly much more and much clearer biblical data available for formulating immutability and omniscience. Nevertheless, open theists do use God's relationship to time as a launching pad for many of their arguments against these more familiar attributes. Unquestionably, the doctrine of divine timelessness as traditionally held is anathema to Process Theology and Open Theism. This makes it very tempting to side with atemporality simply for apologetic reasons. On the other hand, both Process Theology and Open Theism have raised some issues that classical theism must address. The most logical first order of business is, therefore, to examine the present status of timelessness studies.

Defining Time

Here exegete and philosopher alike face a significant problem. The Bible does not define time. Oscar Cullman attempted to extract such a definition from the *lemma* of the New Testament, but James Barr correctly and definitively laid to rest all such diachronic arguments. If we are to build a biblical picture of time it must come from the statements of the Bible, not the meanings of individual words. Given this underdetermined status of the biblical evidence, modern writers tend to view time in one of two ways. These positions are not mutually exclusive, and many writers would claim to hold to a composite. Based on a work by J. M. E. McTaggart, the present designations are A-theory or B-theory time.⁷

A-Theory Time

This view of time, preferred by atemporalists, is also referred to as block, static, or tenseless time. Time is categorized by the concepts of *earlier than*, *simultaneous*, and *later than*. Each category has its own ontological status. The present is simply a highlight on the chronological reality that men refer to as time. There is some sense in which the past and the future exist ontologically and are accessible to any atemporal entity.

B-Theory Time

The view of time most frequently held by temporalists is the B-type, tensed, or dynamic definition of time. Time is viewed as past, present, and future. Proponents of this view argue that the present is ontologically privileged. The past

⁷“There are two camps regarding the nature of time. First are what J. M. E. McTaggart called ‘A-theorists,’ those who believe that time is ordered by the determinations of past, present and future. Second are McTaggart’s ‘B-theorists,’ those who believe that time is ordered by the relationships if earlier than, simultaneous, and later than. . . . Ontologically, A-theorists believe that past and present are real (or, for the presentist version of the A-theory only the present is real) while the future is not. B-theorists, as ontological egalitarians, deny this. They believe there is no such thing as temporal becoming, what Donald Williams calls ‘the myth of passage’” (Garrett DeWeese, “Timeless God, Tenseless Time,” *Philosophia Christi* 2 [2000]:53).

and future are meaningful only so far as they relate to the present. They are inaccessible because they are non-existent.

Analysis

There seems to be very little objective reason to privilege either of these positions. The definitions do provide a useful tool for those already predisposed to a particular view of God's eternal nature. However, those analytical philosophers/theologians who have no theological ax to grind seem to be equally as divided on the subject but for different reasons. It should be acknowledged, however, that man's common experience tends toward a B-theory approach to time.

Divine Atemporality

The classical position held by the church and the Reformers is divine timelessness. God is outside of time, and lives in a timeless now. God is not excluded from time but is unaffected and unrestricted by it. Time came into existence at the beginning. God has equal access to all time, just as He has equal access to all space.

Pros

The upside of divine atemporality is significant. It is supported by the traditional interpretation of several passages of Scripture. It is the traditional position of evangelical believers presently and historically. It augments and is augmented by other traditionally held doctrines. It magnifies God's transcendence. According to some, it provides a potential solution to the divine-sovereignty/human-responsibility debate.

Cons

The downside is also considerable. It appears to excommunicate God from any responsive activity within His creation. It appears to contradict certain passages that ascribe temporal qualities and actions to God. It appears to be logically incoherent.

Divine Temporality

Recently a number of scholars have discarded the doctrine of divine timelessness. Obviously, Process Theologians and Open Theists would fit into this category, but increasingly those who would call themselves traditional theists are raising questions about the viability of an atemporal God. Unfortunately, this onslaught is so recent that no consensus has been reached yet as to exactly how God is temporal. Three major approaches to divine temporality seem to exist: sempitemporality, pantemporality, and omnitemporality. Each has its own strengths

and weaknesses, but they are similar enough that it will be possible to present an integrated analysis after defining each variant.

Sempiternality: Often referred to as sempiternality, this is the opinion that God exists everlastingly and experiences succession in the same way that the creation does. Time is characterized as an uncreated and an essential correlate of personal existence. It might be thought of as an attribute of God.

Pantemporality: This is the proposal that God experiences time in its fullness but is not controlled or ruled by time. In a sense, time becomes an extension of God's being and is almost equal to God. Process thought seems to favor this model.

Omnitemporality: This is the conviction that God experiences his own divine temporality⁸ or that God is only presently in time⁹ and the Lord of time. In either case, God is in reality experiencing succession. His succession is not constrained or controlled by the created succession, but is privileged. God has a different vantage point but experiences similar temporal phenomena.

Pros

A temporal God fits best with man's common view of reality and time. It fits with many of the narrative passages that describe God as acting within time, and allows God to be genuinely responsive to the prayers and actions of His people. It fits with the more open view of God that is currently being proposed by some pastors and teachers. It appears to be the default position assumed by most current writers.¹⁰ It emphasizes God's immanence.

Cons

It demotes God from a strongly infinite to a moderately infinite being. It opens the door for a reduced knowledge of the future. It breaks with a long-standing tradition of the church. It has its own incoherencies. It is closely allied with a libertarian view of human freedom. It is awkward in its handling of many reflective

⁸"For, however surprising it might be, one can coherently maintain both that God is timeless (in a significant sense of timeless) and that states of the divine mind are successively ordered. This follows from the fact that God might be located at a time (or times) not temporally related to the present moment (or at any moment so related to the present moment)" (Douglas K. Blount, "Swinburne and the Doctrine of Divine Timelessness," *Philosophia Christi* 2 [2000]:36-37).

⁹"Once time begins at the moment of creation, either God becomes temporal in virtue of his relation to the temporal world or else he exists just as timelessly with the creation as he does without it. If we choose the first alternative, then, once again God is temporal. But what of the second alternative? Can God remain untouched by the world's temporality? It seems not. For at the first moment of time, God stands in a new relation in which he did not stand before (since there was no before)" (William Lane Craig, "Timelessness and Omnitemporality," *Philosophia Christi* 2 [2000]:29).

¹⁰"Nowadays most theologians and philosophers of religion think that God is in time" (Paul Helm, "Divine Timeless Eternity," in *Four Views: God and Time*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001] 28).

passages of Scripture.

Divine Bi-temporalness

More recently the proposal has come that God is both temporal and atemporal in a very real sense. While on the surface such a proposal appears patently contradictory, at least two credible writers are now promoting it as both philosophically¹¹ and theologically¹² sound. Both men tout this as the “Lord of Time” view. The strength of this view is that it does not force the exegete to anthropomorphize all the passages of Scripture in which God communicates or refers to Himself in temporal terms. On the other hand, it seems to face the negatives elicited by both atemporal and temporal views of God. There are certainly many reasons for opting for such a solution; the big question is whether or not the reasons are compelling enough to defuse the many inconsistencies associated with the position.

Part Two: Temporal versus Timeless

This problem is best analyzed by looking at the two extremes. Before one deals with composite proposals, it is incumbent that he or she examine the extremes. It is possible, especially when dealing with God, that one extreme or the other may in fact be true. Since the strength of the temporal position seems to be its criticisms of the more traditional atemporal position, this article will arrange the discussion around the standard criticism raised against a timeless deity.

Criticism #1: The Bible Presents God as a Temporal Being

This criticism began with Oscar Cullmann who argues, “[P]rimitive Christianity knows nothing of a timeless God.”¹³ Though James Barr effectively moots Cullman’s diachronic analysis,¹⁴ similar assertions continue to proliferate throughout the academic community until it has become the consensus that the Bible

¹¹See Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1992).

¹²See John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2002).

¹³Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia; Westminster, 1966) 63.

¹⁴Since 1961, a paradigmatic shift has taken place across all evangelical scholarship from diachronic to synchronic linguistics. “The current adaptation to biblical studies of what is being learned about language generally within the dual disciplines of linguistics and semantics is a positive sign of the vitality of biblical scholarship today. The modern debt to James Barr, whose monumental study *The Semantics of Biblical Language* ‘demythologized’ Kittel’ (as one writer has put it), simply cannot be tallied. The veritable flood of recent publications which employ the theories and techniques of modern linguistics in biblical studies is clear indication of the success of Barr’s pace-setting effort” (David Alan Black, “Hebrews 1:1-4: A Study in Discourse Analysis,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 49/1 [1987]:175).

is underdeterminative as to whether God is in or outside time.¹⁵ “Since the evidence is not clear, and we seem forced to conclude with James Barr that ‘if such a thing as a Christian doctrine of time has to be developed, the work of discussing it and developing it must belong not to biblical but to philosophical theology.’”¹⁶ This may be too extreme a concession since many of the recent arguments by temporalists and open theists contend that a straightforward reading of the text clearly denies an atemporal deity.¹⁷

Before addressing specific texts, a word concerning hermeneutics is necessary. First, the open theists’ arguments are very compelling on the surface. Clearly a perfunctory reading of the text presents God as authentically interacting with humans in a give-and-take, temporal way. But it also presents God as having arms, eyes, a mouth, etc. “At the heart of the theological differences between the Christian eternalist and temporalist is a different estimate of what constitutes such a good reason as not to take some scriptural representation of God literally.”¹⁸ Opponents of divine timelessness want the text to be taken literally unless there is *just cause* to relegate it to anthropomorphism. While this initially seems like a responsible thing to do, it does place a heavy burden on the interpreter’s ability to decide just cause.¹⁹

A more responsible standard may be that one should be completely open as to how a text is accepted. Different genres require different guidelines. John Calvin, who may rightfully be afforded the title, Father of the Modern Exegetical Method,²⁰

¹⁵“A number of things are important here. First, in my view God’s timeless eternity is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. That teaching is, with respect to our question, somewhat underdetermined; that is, the language of Scripture about God and time is not sufficiently precise so as to provide a definitive resolution of the issue one way or the other. So it would be unwise for the eternalist to claim that divine timelessness is *entailed* by Scripture. But a lack of entailment need not alarm us, because such situations quite commonly arise with the careful, reflective construction of Christian doctrine” (Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity” 31).

¹⁶Craig, “Timelessness and Omnitemporality” 132.

¹⁷“I conclude that the situation for God’s immutability is like that for God’s timelessness: there are no passages in Scripture which can be cited as supporting the doctrine” (Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” in *Four Views: God and Time* 193).

¹⁸Paul Helm, “Response to Nicholas Wolterstorff,” in *Four Views: God and Time* 215.

¹⁹“I think it naïve to take Scripture’s representation of God as literally true unless one has good reason not to. By ‘good reason not to’ Nick apparently means, judged by his method, some teaching in Scripture to the opposite effect. . . . Nick concludes that we should take the temporal descriptions of God literally. But this hermeneutic is insensitive to the genre(s) of Scripture” (William Lane Craig, “Response to Nicholas Wolterstorff,” in *Four Views: God and Time* 222).

²⁰Philip Schaff calls him “the founder of modern grammatico-historical exegesis” (*History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. [(New York): Charles Scribners, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 8:532). Also, “For him [Calvin] a proper method of interpretation means adherence to what would be called today the grammatical historical method” (Kenneth S. Kantzer, “Calvin and the Holy Scriptures,” in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, ed. John F. Walvoord [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957] 153). “It will be seen then that for Calvin the basic hermeneutical principle lies in the adherence

certainly would have rejected any principle of interpretation that indiscriminately privileged the literal meaning of any text. Narrative texts in particular are notorious for anthropomorphizing God's interactions with man. Calvin asserted that all Scripture was written for man to understand and, as such, must be held as an accommodation to his weakness.²¹

In his article "Hellenistic or Hebrew," Michael Horton presents a rather balanced approach to this matter. Building on the Creator-creature relationship espoused by Calvin, he suggests that analogy is not a "fall-back strategy" to be used when the interpreter finds something that he does not like. "Rather it is the warp and woof of their covenantal approach, a necessary implication of the creator-creature relationship as they understand it. All of God's self revelation is analogical, not just some of it. This is why, for instance, Calvin speaks of God's 'lisp[ing]' or speaking 'baby talk' in his condescending mercy."²² Paul Helm concurs:

On the eternalist view, in revealing his will God must accommodate himself to human spatiotemporal conditions by the use of sensory, figurative, anthropomorphic language about himself, particularly by using the language of change. So at the heart of the divine accommodation is a logical point: it is a logically necessary condition of God's dialogue with his creatures that the divine dialogue partner must recognize that such creatures must act and react in time.²³

Second, for theological reasons it would appear more appropriate to allow more reflective materials to weigh in more significantly than narrative.²⁴ Obviously

to what we now term the grammatico-historical method. The true meaning of Scripture is sought in an attempt to reach the mind and situation of the human author" (A. Skevington Wood, *The Principles of Biblical Interpretation as Enunciated by Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Luther and Calvin* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967] 89).

²¹In the *Institutes* alone this concept occurs at least 20 times. Four times it is used of the human writer himself in accommodating to his audience, three times of the Scriptures, once of the sacraments, but most frequently of God or the Spirit, e.g., I:11:1; 13:1; 17:13; etc. He follows Irenaeus to understand this as the method of divine revelation through the incarnation: "In this sense, Irenaeus says, that the Father, who is boundless in himself, is bounded in the Son, because he has accommodated himself to our capacity, lest our minds should be swallowed up by the immensity of his glory" (II:6:4). For Calvin as for Augustine, this doctrine becomes the explanation for why there is not more extensive and explicit emphasis on predestination in Scripture: "For it has been shrewdly observed by Augustine, (*de Genesi ad Literam*, Lib. 5) that we can safely follow Scripture, which walks softly, as with a mother's step, in accommodation to our weakness," III:21:4. See also T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 57-59.

²²Michael S. Horton, "Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theism and the Reformed Theological Method," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002):324.

²³Paul Helm, "Response to Critics," in *Four Views: God and Time* 79.

²⁴Helm deals with this issue extensively in his article "The Problem of Dialogue," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature*, eds. Gregory E. Ganssle and David M. Woodruff (Oxford: University Press, 2002):207-19 and less extensively in "Divine Timeless Eternity," *Philosophia Christi* 2 (2000):21-27.

there is significantly less reflective material available, but how many reflective statements are required to change one's exegesis of a narrative account. Conceding that many narrative texts exist that, when taken in a straightforward way, seem to imply that God is in time, this article will concern itself with the more reflective literature in an attempt to see if the temporalists have been inappropriately biased in their handling of such texts.²⁵

Genesis 1:1; John 1:1

These two passages, along with other "in the beginning" passages, clearly imply a start to all created things. Only God *is* present at the ultimate causation of created things. Unless one is willing to argue that time is uncreated, then it follows that time begins at Gen 1:1.

Genesis 1:1, which is neither a subordinate clause nor a summary title, states, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." According to James Barr, this absolute beginning, taken in conjunction with the expression, "And there was evening and there was morning, one day" (v.5) indicating the first day, may very well be intended to teach that the beginning was not simply the beginning of the physical world but the beginning of time itself, and that, consequently God may be thought of as timeless. This decision is rendered all the more plausible when the Genesis account is read against the backdrop of ancient Egyptian cosmology. Egyptian cosmology includes the idea that creation took place at "the first time" (*sp tpy*). John Currid takes both the Egyptian and the Hebrew cosmologies to involve the notion that the moment of creation is the beginning of time.²⁶

Moreover, if one rejects the idea that time has a beginning, that one is forced to explain an actual infinity. If God existed for an infinite number of moments prior to creation, then creation has not yet occurred. This is part of the Kalam²⁷ cosmologi-

Though his argument deals specifically with the possibility of a strongly omniscient or omnideterminate God carrying on an ethical and meaningful dialogue with a temporal being, the underlying issue remains the same: How can God talk like He is in time while all the while being outside of time? The answer is that He can do so as long as the person with whom He is dealing is aware that he is talking to God. "The language which asserts or implies change in God invariably has to do with divine human dialogue, where God speaks to and acts in behalf of his people and his people speak and act in return. If dialogue between God and humankind is to be real and not make-believe, then God cannot represent himself (in his role as a dialogue partner) as wholly immutable, for then dialogue, real dialogue would be impossible" (ibid., 24).

²⁵"Open Theism in practice, if not always in intent, makes ectypal knowledge archetypal and analogical language univocal. God's being for us is his being in and for himself" (Horton, "Hellenistic or Hebrew?" 337).

²⁶William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001) 17. Note also David Braine: "The importance of the 'in the beginning' is yet plainer, Genesis leaves no place for a time before God made heaven and earth, and therefore no idea of time as a vessel without beginning containing both God and creation" ("God, Eternity and Time, An Essay in Review of Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*," *Evangelical Quarterly* 66 [1994]:339).

²⁷See William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

cal argument.²⁸ Some have tried to avoid this incoherence by postulating a non-metric, non-divided or an amorphous kind of time prior to the creation. If such a kind of time exists, it does not seem to be much different from timelessness.²⁹

John 8:58

The grammar of this passage is striking. One would normally expect Jesus to say, “Before Abraham was, I was.” However, He says, “Before Abraham was, I am.” The temporalist claims that Jesus is simply invoking the divine name. This makes little sense in context, however. The Jews were asking Jesus about his age. They wanted to know how he could know Abraham personally. Christ’s answer unmistakably places him in a different relationship to time than the onlookers. It was not the morphology of the statement that caused the crowd to attack Jesus; it was the meaning. Yes, they recognized this as a claim to deity; not because he had spoken some sacred syllables, but because he had made a claim that only God could make: he is outside of time. Jesus

deliberately picked up the present and put it back before Abraham, but still referred to that distant period in the present tense. Though it was centuries ago, to Christ it was ‘now.’ Even if He were here today, he would still refer to the time before Abraham as the ‘present’ time. Why? Because He is God and with God there is no passage of time, but all is ‘present.’³⁰

Revelation 13:8

Arthur Custance argues that the “lamb slain from (ajpov³¹) the foundation of the world” is another case of temporal inversion.³² Taken in a straightforward way, one would expect that the time of execution was simultaneous with creation.

²⁸“Some have claimed that a God who exists in time, without beginning or end, would embody an ‘actual infinitive,’ that is, an infinity of actual events in temporal sequence, past and future. . . . But if an infinity of days elapsed before creation, then creation never took place. . . . I cannot detect a flaw in this argument, but I would hesitate to give it doctrinal weight, in the absence of biblical teaching” (Frame, *Doctrine of God* 552).

²⁹“The problem is that such a changeless, undifferentiated state looks suspiciously like a state of timelessness!” (Craig, “Timelessness and Omnitemporality” 159).

³⁰Arthur C. Custance, *Time and Eternity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 40. Leon Morris concurs, “It is eternity of being, and not simply being which has lasted through several centuries” (*The Gospel according to John*, in NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971] 474). William Hendriks also agrees: “Over against Abraham’s fleeting span of life (see Gen. 25:7) Jesus places his own timeless present” (*The Gospel of John*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953] 67).

³¹The phrase “from the foundation of the world” occurs ten times in the NT. In these ajpov is used seven times and prov three. Since the phrases are generally considered to be synonymous and since the prepositions have considerable semantic range, it would seem that the more dominant idea is “from” versus “before” creation. This would support a timeless perspective since there was no “before” (a temporal term) before creation.

³²Custance, *Time and Eternity* 41.

This is almost universally understood to mean that the crucifixion of Christ was planned, but not necessarily accomplished at that point. That, however, understands the text analogously, which is exactly what the temporalist object to in narrative passages. An atemporalist may not wish to understand this passage in a literal way but he has no problem in doing so. A temporalist *must* understand it metaphorically.

2 Peter 3:8; Psalm 90:4

In both of these passages the literal meaning is clearly that time has no significance for God. Second Peter 3:8 (“one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day”) cannot mean that time passes slower or faster, because both extremes are avowed. “The general truth underlying both is that the measures of time are relative to man: to the Eternal, who is omnipresent in time as in space, all times are equally near.”³³ Psalm 90:4 (“For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night”) seems even clearer in this respect.

In verse four, Moses again focuses on God’s timelessness. His point is that time has no meaning with God. To illustrate that point rather graphically, he says, *For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past*. What is a thousand years in God’s sight? Moses uses two phrases to describe what a thousand years is in God’s sight. The first phrase is, *but as yesterday when it is past*. In other words, a thousand years with God is like only a night in the life of man. It is not even a full 24-hour day, only a 12-hour night. The first comparison he makes, then, is that a thousand years—a very long period from man’s perspective—is to God merely about 12 hours. Moses then points out that 12 hours is even a bit too long, and the second phrase he uses to make his point is, *as a watch in the night*. In Moses’ time, the night was divided into three watches; in comparison to God’s eternity, man’s life is only one watch out of three, only a part of the night. Thus, the Psalmist reduces the thousand years of God to only four hours of human life. What is a thousand years with God? Merely four hours of human life! However, Moses goes further, emphasizing that this is not four hours of the day, but four hours of the night. It is four hours of the night of which the sleeper takes no reckoning, four hours that have vanished upon the sleeper’s awakening. This is the time that people sleep, and people do not reckon time while they are sleeping. While we are fast asleep, there is, in fact, no awareness of the passing of minutes and hours.³⁴

Jude 25; Titus 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:9

The Jude passage reads, “to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ

³³Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. Jude and the Second Epistle of St. Peter* (New York: Macmillan, 1907; reprint, Minneapolis: Klok and Klok, 1978) 156.

³⁴Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “Psalm 90: An Exposition,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 4 (1998):3-4. Note also Jack Deere: “It is futile to argue for a symbolic meaning of *tav civlia e[th]* in Revelation 20:4–6 on the basis of Psalm 90:4 or 2 Peter 3:8, for the latter are not saying that a thousand years are a day. Rather they point to God’s transcendence in respect to time” (“Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4-6,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 [1978]:70).

our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and power, before all time, and now, and for evermore." If there was a "before all time" (pro; panto;" tou` aijw`no") and if God is without beginning, then God must have existed prior to time and therefore be outside of time. Titus 1:2 ("in hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before times eternal") and 2 Tim 1:9 ("but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before times eternal") make similar statements. Second Timothy is particularly poignant. It reads literally "before age-long time" (pro; crownwn aijwnivwn). Craig comments on the Jude passage: "The passage contemplates an everlasting future duration, but affirms a beginning to past time and implies God's existence, using an almost inevitable *façon de parler*, 'before' time began."³⁵

Ecclesiastes 3:15-16

From the perspective of at least one writer, Ecclesiastes is the only philosophically reflective writing in the Bible. These verses ("I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it; and God hath done it, that men should fear before him. That which is hath been long ago; and that which is to be hath long ago been: and God seeketh again that which is passed away"), while somewhat enigmatic, clearly affirm that God has a different relationship to time than do mere mortals. This cannot refer to the supposed circularity of human history; the passage clearly has to do with the purposes and plans of God.³⁶ A straightforward reading of the passage seems to indicate that God created not just the material universe but history itself. These verses claim that in the past the future already existed for God.

Criticism #2: The Modern Consensus Is that God Is a Temporal Being

This seems to be a fact conceded by almost all philosophers of religion.³⁷ But this is not as powerful an argument when taken in a broader context. It is also almost universally admitted that the traditional position of the church is atemporality (Duns Scotus and William of Ockham are notable exceptions). Were one to consider the church in a more pantemporal way, temporalism appears to be more of a temporal

³⁵Craig, *Time and Eternity* 19.

³⁶Referring to 3:1-15, Walter C. Kaiser writes, "For all the affairs of life, argues Qoheleth, God has set a time. The length of time and the particular events along that time band are each ordained in the providence of God" (*Ecclesiastes: Total Life* [Chicago: Moody, 1979] 62).

³⁷"From Augustine through Aquinas, the position held overwhelmingly by philosophers was that God is atemporal. God, on this view, is outside time. Most philosophers today disagree. While affirming that God is eternal, they understand his eternity as his being temporally everlasting" (Gregory E. Ganssle, "Introduction: Thinking about God and Time," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* 3).

anomaly than a consensus.³⁸ Furthermore, it is only a consensus among a particular category of writers. Theologians who do analytical philosophy clearly favor temporality and are doing the majority of the writing on the subject. Asserting that the biblical evidence is indeterminative or underdeterminative,³⁹ modern philosophical theology has tirelessly generated analysis and opinions on the subject.

Those who are writing from a more systematic vantage are much different. Millard Erickson, Charles Ryrie, Wayne Grudem, Carl F. H. Henry, C. S. Lewis, and Louis Sperry Chafer all affirm atemporality. The lone voice for a fully temporal position is John Feinberg.

It would also appear that most of those who are working from a more philosophical vantage also have a strong commitment to human libertarian freedom. The inherent nature of the discipline itself necessitates a predilection to the autonomy of human reason. Such predilections are usually accompanied by a strong view of human freedom. John Frame in a sense recognizes this truth. "It seems to me that once we deny the existence of libertarian human freedom, all the relevant considerations favor atemporality, and none favor temporality."⁴⁰ In fact, William Hasker demands that any view of divine atemporality must have as one of its two central purposes to "provide a solution to the problem of freewill and foreknowledge."⁴¹ This close association between libertarian freewill and divine temporality should not *a priori* diminish the arguments for divine temporality; however, this is important in light of temporalists' attempts to discredit atemporality by associating it with Platonic philosophy as discussed in the next subsection.

Criticism #3: Atemporality Is a Blatant Infiltration of Greek Philosophy into Christian Theology

Of late, it seems to be somewhat in vogue to accuse the early church of wholesale surrender to Platonic thought.⁴² It also seems that most atemporalists meekly accept such claims as if they are essentially accurate. Undoubtedly, ancient Greek philosophy exerted a significant influence on the church fathers. Augustine

³⁸“The God of Christian Orthodoxy is timelessly eternal as mainstream theologians like Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, the Protestant Reformers, and, in fact, most Christian theologians affirm” (Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* 239).

³⁹I am not sure that this is a valid protasis, but it is certainly an almost universally accepted one.

⁴⁰Frame, *Doctrine of God* 557.

⁴¹William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989) 146.

⁴²“The basic problem that I had to deal with here is the fact that the classical model of Christian theism, shaped so decisively by Augustine under the influence of Pagan philosophy located the biblical picture of a dynamic personal God in the context of a way of thinking about God that placed high value on the deity’s being timeless, changeless, passionless, unmoved and unmovable” (Clark H. Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *The Grace of God and The Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989] 23).

in particular was well versed in Neo-Platonic thought. This should not however in and of itself invalidate his conclusions.

It may be that the conceptual apparatus of eternalism owes much to the language of Neo-Platonism; it is undoubtedly true that the classical formulas of classical trinitarianism owe much to the language of Greek metaphysics. But though perhaps Neo-Platonism influenced the way eternalism is formulated and expressed, it would be hasty to suppose that the use of such language signals a takeover of biblical ideas by pagan ideas. The relevant question is, does the use of such ideas help us to summarize and epitomize the thought of the biblical writers in ways that, because of their situation, they were not able to do themselves. And do such formulations help us rule out certain types of inferences about God that are unscriptural. It is the claim of many eternalists that eternalism is a better approach to the relevant scriptural data than any of its rivals and that it prevents us from making certain types of false inferences about God.⁴³

Everyone who thinks, thinks according to some “philosophic” format. Analytical philosophy is just as much a philosophy as was Platonism or Neo-Platonism. How does one know the modern way is a better way to think? He does not. In order for this charge to stand, two facts must be established. First, it must be demonstrated that the influence of Greek thought in the formulation of divine atemporality is *inherently* detrimental to constructing proper theology.

The modern theological contrast of Greek philosophical abstractions with concrete biblical truths is, however, often prejudiced by an encounter theory of truth. While critics deplore Aristotle’s view of time as Greek abstraction they seem to ignore his definition of time as the numerical aspect of motion. One may of course call this abstraction, but so is all science; so, for that matter, is justification by faith, if one’s philosophy admits of any abstraction. The fact is Plato and Aristotle had no abstract ideas.⁴⁴

Secondly, it must similarly be established that present formulations for divine temporality are not themselves the result of man’s philosophy and merely the intrusion of present biases into what may be sound doctrine.⁴⁵ Even if one were willing to call the first charge a draw, a significant number of evangelicals would not

⁴³Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity” 32-33. Nicholas Wolterstorff, himself a significant, if not the most significant, temporalist agrees, “It is not infrequently said, by those who oppose the doctrine of God’s timelessness, that in embracing the doctrine the church fathers were succumbing to the power of Greek philosophical thought and that later theologians, on account of the prestige of tradition, then followed in the footsteps of their predecessors. From this claim I insist on disassociating myself, and that for a number of reasons. For one thing, not everything the Greek philosophers said was false; . . . more importantly, the objection distorts what happened in the formation of Christian theology” (Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality” 211-12).

⁴⁴Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* 251.

⁴⁵Pinnock openly espouses modern thinking to that of the ancient Greeks in respect to theism at least. “Curiously in this respect at least modern culture, which values history so much, is closer to the biblical view than classical theism” (Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius” 24).

be open to accept the strong sense of libertarian freedom⁴⁶ that many temporalists are promoting.⁴⁷ If Open Theism and its definition of human freedom are to survive as a legitimate option for evangelicals, then it is clear that atemporality must go. There does not seem to be any such compelling philosophical agenda urging classical theists to defend divine timelessness. It, therefore, seems palpable that the charge of ulterior motives is much more germane to the contemporary temporalist camp.

Criticism #4: The Concept of a Timeless God is Incoherent

How much weight ought to be afforded incoherence as a criticism is not clear. Carl Henry would certainly consider it significant. Cornelius Van Til would not. In either case, out of respect for those who do weight these formulations more heavily, it seems prudent to give careful consideration to such objections. Though multiple variations for each argument exist, this article will condense the types of objections into five categories: arguments concerning consistency with other attributes, arguments concerning simultaneity, arguments concerning personhood, arguments concerning the incarnation, and arguments concerning the nature of time.

Arguments Concerning Consistency with Other Attributes

This is sometimes referred to as the indexical argument. “A number of different authors have offered arguments which attempt to show that the assumption of God’s timelessness is inconsistent with certain other truths about God which are central to Christian theism.”⁴⁸ In their simplest forms such arguments assert that if God is timeless, he cannot be omniscient for there are certain common facts that God’s creatures would know, but God could not. It is argued that an atemporal God cannot know what time it is. God could know for example that it is sunny in Pottersville, New York, at 7 a.m. on August 8th, but he could not know that it is sunny *now*. All time is equally present for God; therefore, He cannot experience moment-by-moment knowledge. He cannot know *now*, therefore he cannot know the time. The argument is generally formulated somewhat like this.

1. There are essentially tensed truths (e.g., those expressed by sentences containing the temporal indexical “now”).
2. A timeless being cannot know essentially tensed truths.

⁴⁶“What then do philosophers and theologians mean by the concept of a libertarian view of freedom. Simply stated, the most basic sense of this view is that a person’s act is free, if it is not causally determined. For libertarians this does not mean that our acts are random or arbitrary. Reasons and causes play upon the will as one chooses, but none of them is sufficient to incline the will decisively in one direction or the other” (Stephen J. Wellum, “Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience, Inerrancy, and Open Theism: An Evaluation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 [2002]:259).

⁴⁷John Frame gives a strong critique of a libertarian view of human freedom in *No Other God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2001) 122-31.

⁴⁸DeWeese, “Timeless God, Tenseless Time” 54.

3. Therefore, if God is timeless, there are truths he cannot know.⁴⁹

These arguments seem to be more about the way one formulates a truth statement than about knowledge itself. Nelson Pike, himself a temporalist, concludes his discussion of this matter: “So far as I can determine, all that has been established is that there are certain forms of words that a timeless individual could not use when formulating or reporting on his knowledge.”⁵⁰ Paul Helm notes that making God temporal only trades one problem of omniscience for another. “The temporalist is in a parallel position with respect to the issue. For if God is in time, then there are also types of propositions that such a temporal God cannot know, propositions that express knowledge of the universe from the perspective of a timeless eternity.”⁵¹

A second argument has to do with present dissatisfaction with the doctrines of impassibility and simplicity. In some senses this is a guilt-by-association argument but in other ways it raises some real issues. How can a timeless God be an interactive and responsive God? Care needs to be taken here. Many of the objections to these doctrines are raised against the present formulations as opposed to the original constructs. God is clearly not temporally-specific responsive. He answers prayers before they are asked (Isa 65:24). One’s problem with these attributes is inversely proportional to one’s favor toward sovereignty. Open Theism requires a temporally responsive God; Reformed theism does not.

On the other hand, some theological truths seem to require a timeless God. The atonement is such an example. Though considerable discussion pertains to the number of people for whom Christ died, little question exists regarding the quality of the penalty that was paid. Clearly Jesus paid at least the saints’ sin debt in full. Since the wages of sin is eternal death, how could Jesus pay an eternal penalty in three hours or three days? The most plausible answer is that He is a timeless being.⁵²

For many, the doctrine of aseity is one of the strongest arguments favoring

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970; reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2002) 95.

⁵¹Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” in *Four Views: God and Time* 41. He also writes, “What I have shown is that the claim that God exists in timeless eternity enables one to trade off one particular mode of divine knowledge, a mode which requires the use of temporal indexical expressions, for an enlargement of the range of God’s knowledge, a range which encompasses God’s knowledge of the future, that which is future to those who are in time. And as trading away a particular mode of knowledge does not decrease God’s knowledge in any material respect, and enlarging the range of God’s knowledge increases it, and as God is by definition omniscient, the trade-off is worth making” (*Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time* [New York: Oxford University, 1988] 94).

⁵²See Custance, *Time and Eternity* 48-49. His argument is slightly different, but moves in the same direction.

atemporality.⁵³ If God is to possess illimitable life, then that life must be possessed in its fullness. Man thinks one thought at a time. He enjoys one pleasure at a time. The argument is that “no being that experiences life sequentially can have the fullest life possible.”⁵⁴ David Braine comments, “Yet more crucial: for God’s life to be possessed *simul* is not for it to be possessed in one instant of mundane time as this is measured by continual regular motions, but for it to be possessed in one act. This is the significance of Aquinas’ insistence that the ‘now’ of eternity is not the ‘now’ of time.”⁵⁵

Arguments Concerning Simultaneity

Feinberg explains the objection simply and effectively: “If for an atemporal God every moment is simultaneously (to use Boethius’s terminology) present to him, then by logical extension, every temporal moment must be simultaneous with every other temporal moment. Of course this is absurd.”⁵⁶ At first glance this appears to be a very powerful argument. However, Paul Helm points out that simultaneous is a temporal term and God is not temporal.⁵⁷ Stump and Kretzmann argue for a kind of

⁵³“In studying God we notice that whatever God is, he is to the greatest possible degree. He knows everything that is possible to know. He can do everything that is possible to do. He is maximally merciful. This ‘maximal property idea’ can be applied to the nature of God’s life. God is a living being. . . . If whatever is true of him is true to the greatest possible degree, then his life is the fullest life possible. . . . Some philosophers argue that this fact about God’s life requires that he be atemporal. No being that experiences its life sequentially can have the fullest possible” (Ganssle, “Introduction” 22). “What are the theological attractions of timelessness as applied to God? There are a number, but they all may be said to rest, as many of our basic claims rest, on an intuition that has had enormous appeal to many thinkers, and still has to some. It is the idea of divine fullness or self-sufficiency” (Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity” 29). “This traditional view does pay attention to—indeed embodies—the intuition that God must transcend time. There is a great deal of attachment to the traditional notion of a timeless God. In a fine recent article on this topic, Katherin Rogers writes, ‘Criticisms of the tenseless view of time are not powerful enough to necessitate abandoning the venerable tradition of an eternal God’ (cited by Alan G. Padgett, “Eternity as Relative Timelessness,” in *Four Views: God and Time* 94).

⁵⁴Ganssle, “Introduction” 22.

⁵⁵Braine, “God, Eternity and Time” 341.

⁵⁶John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001) 407. Feinberg argues for a pure temporal position. He gives his reasons on pages 428-30. Unfortunately he seems to be confused as to the atemporalist position and argues against a hetero-temporal or idio-temporal God. He seems so caught up in the arguments presented by Stump and Kretzmann that he assumes that atemporalists are arguing for a different form of duration not a different mode altogether. Because he requires some form of sequence, even in God, he gravitates toward those atemporalist views which propound an atemporal duration. Even that phrase is self-contradictory. As long as one is required to “make sense” (428) of the notion of atemporal eternity as a presupposition to accepting atemporality, it is very unlikely that he will do so.

⁵⁷“God knows his creatures. This knowledge is time-free; it is not, for example, foreknowledge, or memory, nor is it contemporaneous knowledge. It is knowledge about which it makes no sense to ask how long the knower has known, or when he came to know. Thus to attempt to raise, in a strict and philosophical manner, questions about simultaneity and non-simultaneity of the divine will and human

eternal simultaneity (ET simultaneity), but their efforts seem to imply a different kind of temporality for God as opposed to atemporality.⁵⁸ These defenses are usually countered by suggesting that such a being becomes so *other* that he could not possibly interact with his creation.

That God's perspective is both totally transcendent and totally immanent can be affirmed by two convincing examples. Both of these depend on developing spatial arguments that parallel and contradict the logic of the temporal arguments. Feinberg rejects all such argumentation, claiming an unwarranted analogy between time and space. He misunderstands Helm at this point. Time and space do not need to be analogous, only the aspects of time and space that relate to the specific *form* of the argument.⁵⁹ "If we come to this conclusion on the basis of arguments about space then there is no good reason to withhold the conclusion that God is outside time, since the arguments that establish one are *strictly parallel* to the arguments that establish the other."⁶⁰

For example, humans and mice are not inherently analogous; however, one may construct some arguments in which they do appear to be analogous. Researchers do experiments on mice and then extrapolate to humans. Therefore, some analogies can be drawn between the two. To reject the spatiality arguments categorically based on the differences between space and time is a generalization fallacy. Apart from this general objection, no one has demonstrated a flaw in the actual argument as used by Helm.

It is generally assumed or stated that all temporal beings must have temporal location and temporal extension. The same is true of all beings that exist in space. They have location and occupy space (extension). Any being that does not occupy space cannot affect space. By extension, a being that is not in time (temporal extension) cannot interact with beings that are in time. This is an answer to the "otherness" problem. Angels occupy no space but they affect space. They can produce spatial effects such as sound. They have location without extension.

The second answer has to do with the supposed simultaneity problem. God is omnipresent. God and Marshall Wicks are in the same place. God and George Bush are in the same place. Therefore, Marshall and George Bush are in the same place and that is clearly absurd. It is both true and absurd because God does not occupy space in the same way that we occupy space, or we would be pantheists.

will (for example) is to be guilty of a category mistake. It is like asking for the physical dimensions of a thought" (Helm, *Eternal God* 37).

⁵⁸See Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness and Action," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1992):463-82.

⁵⁹"It ought to be stressed that in these arguments it has not been assumed, nor argued, that space and time are in all respects analogous, but that they are analogous in those respects that are relevant for the propounding of the arguments. The exact respect in which time can be regarded as similar to space is a matter of controversy into which there is no need to venture" (ibid., 46).

⁶⁰Helm, *Eternal God* 55 (emphasis added).

Spatially, he is both location-less and extension-less. He is aspatial. Omnipresence and immensity are human attempts to define a being who is outside of space. That He is outside of space does not keep Him from acting and interacting in space. Congruently, that He is atemporal does not keep him from acting and interacting in time. God clearly has a different mode of spatial and temporal interaction from humans, but that it is different does not mean it is impossible. Henry's words are sobering in this respect:

[N]o analysis of finite beings, however thorough, will securely support a ladder that reaches to the Infinite, and . . . to reject a demarcation between the infinite and the finite, even when such rejection seeks to preserve the finite within the life cycle of the Infinite, actually sacrifices the living God of the Bible. Valid knowledge of infinite being is possible only on an alternative model of the relationship between God and the universe.⁶¹

Arguments Concerning Personhood

This is the one argument that convinced Nelson Pike to embrace temporality. The argument is simple: a timeless person could not carry out many of the functions that are necessary to entail personhood.

A timeless being could not deliberate, anticipate, or remember. It could not speak or write a letter, nor could it produce sounds or written words on a piece of paper. It could not smile, grimace or weep. Further a timeless person could not be affected or prompted by another. It could not respond to needs, overtures, delights or antagonisms of human beings.⁶²

One might simply point out that there are human *people* who do not qualify by this definition. Unborn infants by this definition would not qualify. There are severely mentally handicapped persons who are born and live for significant amounts of time who do not exercise any of these functions. Are they not people?

Even if one concedes that such beings qualify as persons by association with the rest of the race, one can still question this definition of personhood. The Bible is very clear that the difference between man and the animals is that man alone was created in the image of God. God exercises the essential attributes of personality on a much higher level than man does. Man reflects God not the other way around. Memory is needed because man forgets; God does not. Anticipation is necessary because man does not know the future; God does. Deliberation is needed because man does not intuitively know the right or the best course of action; God does. God clearly interacts with man but does so in a different mode than men interact with one another.

Any view of God must allow Him to respond to multiple billions of people simultaneously. To think that he univocally responds to particular persons is

⁶¹Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* 226.

⁶²Pike, *God and Timelessness* 128.

completely absurd for a temporal God. At any given moment God is responding to the actions and thoughts and perhaps the dreams of six billion people. Does he require six billion personality centers to respond presently and appropriately to each individual? To require God to be limited by the normal characteristics of human personhood is theological folly. On the other hand, could a timeless God respond univocally to six billion people simultaneously (in a non-temporal way)? That seems very plausible. Is not an atemporal God who deals with his people personally and undividedly superior to a temporal God who is dividing his attention among the mass of humanity? Which version of God is more personal and responsive?

Additionally, if God is responding temporally, it follows that he must be simultaneously experiencing all of his emotions across their entire spectrum at any given time. Because the six billion inhabitants of planet earth are at any given time exhibiting all imaginable behaviors, God feels great joy, little joy, mild disappointment, intense disappointment, righteous indignation, extreme wrath, and everything in between—all at the same time. There can be no other conclusion if God is temporal. This does not sound at all like the personal God of the Bible.

Arguments Concerning the Incarnation

“Neo-Protestant theologians now routinely contend that the traditional evangelical view of divine timelessness not only nullifies significant divine human relationships but also reduces the incarnational ministry of Christ to a docetic sham activity.”⁶³ There is no way that a few paragraphs in this article can begin to deal with such an important and variegated subject. The question of the relationship between the two natures is so nuanced that one would need to provide a potential answer for each variant. How one configures the kenosis is also significant. Realizing that the following presentation may not be applicable to all possible positions regarding the incarnation, it is presented as a general answer with a significantly wide application.

The argument against atemporality would go something like this.

1. Jesus was the bearer of temporal properties.
2. No bearer of temporal properties is atemporal.
3. Jesus Christ = God the Son (a divine person).
4. God the Son is not atemporal.⁶⁴

The answer to this argument is simply to apply this reasoning to other human characteristics exhibited by Jesus. Jesus was located in space; does this preclude God from being spaceless? Jesus did not know the hour of His return; does this preclude God from that knowledge? These quandaries are generally settled by

⁶³Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* 253.

⁶⁴Thomas D. Senor, “Incarnation, Timelessness, and Leibniz’s Law Problem,” in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* 220.

referring to the kenosis or the two natures of Christ. "So, just as one can employ the two-minds view to defeat the claim that the Son's being incarnate need not preclude his being omniscient (or omnipotent, or omnipresent), one can also employ it to defend the claim that his being incarnate need not preclude his being timeless."⁶⁵ Note the following argument in consort with the argument above.

1. Jesus was the bearer of physical properties.
2. No bearer of temporal properties is incorporeal.
3. Jesus Christ = God the Son (a divine person).
4. God the Son is not incorporeal.

Arguments Concerning the Nature of Time

Alan Padgett, who will be discussed a bit later in the article, writes, "The main objection I have to the timeless model is simply stated: it is only true if the stasis theory of time is true. Since the stasis theory of time is false, we should reject the timeless view because we should whenever possible bring coherence to theology."⁶⁶ This appears to be a methodological error more than a logical one. One should base his or her view of time on the nature of God and not vice versa. Even the dynamic view of time can be cited in this respect.

Alan also makes remarks that the stasis theories of time rely too heavily on abstractions, human creations. But I doubt that metaphysics has quite the power that Alan supposes. The fact that Alan Prior's strongly held views about human freedom and the openness of the future (expressed for example in his *Papers on Time and Tense* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967]) is one piece of evidence to suggest that it is not the logic that drives the metaphysics but the other way around. There is certainly no one-way street from logic to metaphysics.⁶⁷

Part Three: Composites

This part of the article will deal with a specific form of composite: those that maintain temporality and atemporality simultaneously. Positions such as omnitemporality as defined by William Craig may be designated as a composite, but only in a sequential sense. Others, such as Stump and Kretzmann, offer a parallel but still atemporal alternative. The idea of a timeless duration seems patently contradictory and really solves very little. Three recent works have claimed to offer a mediating position in which God is atemporal and temporal at the same time.

⁶⁵Douglas K. Blount, "On the Incarnation of a Timeless God," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* 245-46. I am not sure I would use the phrase "two-mind view," but the argument seems very sound.

⁶⁶Padgett, "Eternity as Relative Timelessness" 95.

⁶⁷Paul Helm, "Response to Alan G. Padgett," in *Four Views: God and Time* 113.

Millard Erickson

Erickson, believing that the argument is at an impasse, suggests a “synthetic position.”⁶⁸ His basic contention is that God is “ontologically atemporal/aspatial but actively or influentially present within the space-time universe.”⁶⁹ He further states, “[T]his suggestion will meet with protests from both temporalists and atemporalists, for the discussion has been contested in a sort of ‘winner-take-all’ atmosphere.”⁷⁰ No matter how one reads it, his position does not seem to differ at all from what atemporalists have consistently stated. No conservative atemporalist would deny that God is actively and influentially present in space and time. This appears to be no synthesis at all.

John Frame and Alan Padgett: The Lord of Time

There are very significant differences in the position held by these two men, but they both use the idea that God is the Lord of time as the motif to unfold God’s relationship to time. Padgett writes,

The fact that God is Lord of Time I have understood to mean that he has a plan or design for human history, and nothing takes place outside his will; that he is not limited or changed in any fundamental way by the passage of time and that he is a necessary being (*a se* and metaphysically necessary) who lives for ever and ever.⁷¹

In spite of his attempts to create a new kind of “time” for God, he appears to hold to a form of divine temporality.⁷²

John Frame’s position differs significantly.

But God’s temporal immanence does not contradict his lordship over time or the exhaustiveness of his decree. These temporal categories are merely aspects of God’s general transcendence and immanence as the Lord. The give-and-take between God and the creation requires, not a reduced, but an enhanced view of his sovereignty. God is the Lord *in* time as well as *above* time.

So God is temporal after all, but not merely temporal. He really exists in time, but

⁶⁸Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 134.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 139.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹Padgett, *God, Eternity, and the Nature of Time* 125.

⁷²“I fail to see that Alan Padgett’s ‘relative timelessness’ proposal is really a third model of the relation of God to time. It appears to me definitely to be a variant on the everlastingness view. It is, in fact, fully compatible with my own articulation and defense of the everlastingness view. In some respects it goes beyond my own commitments; at no point does it go against them” (Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Response to Alan G. Padgett,” in *Four Views: God and Time* 120).

he also transcends time in such a way as to exist outside it. He is both inside and outside the temporal box—a box that can neither confine him nor keep him out. This is the model that does most justice to the biblical data.⁷³

The immediate question that arises is how this differs from the classical definition of timelessness. His purpose is clearly to rid himself of the simple, impassible God of Thomistic theism. But is there really any concession in his position? How is God affected, influenced, or changed by His exposure to time? Frame allows no change in the decrees of God. He does not allow that God's knowledge of events is any more vivid.⁷⁴ He does not allow God to experience temporal change.⁷⁵ It is purely relational. If God's atemporal knowing is no different from His temporal knowing, what purpose does Frame have for creating this somewhat impotent caveat? It certainly sounds good, but does it generate any significant advantages for the theologian? This would be very nice if God were only dealing with one person on the time spectrum, but Frame now has Him in a truly temporal give-and-take relationship with billions of people simultaneously.

Frame's position has an inherent verbal contradiction. Such contradictions or antinomies do occur in theology. The trinity can be stated as an antinomy. God is only one and God is three. That He is three in a different sense than He is one is commonly recognized. Now to say that God is temporal and atemporal at the same time is contradictory unless he is temporal in a different way than he is atemporal. Frame demonstrates no difference in the two. Atemporalists do not deny that God is omnitemporal. They deny that He experiences any passage of time. They do not deny that He can manifest Himself temporally. He is just not limited by that manifestation. Atemporalists argue that God has the same relationship to time that He has to space. Frame's difference with atemporalist appears to be only semantic. No real consequence or limitation is placed on God by his position. The God of the atemporalist is no different from Frame's God except in verbiage.

Ganssle make this argument very effectively. Because Frame holds to immutable vividness and an immutable future, he would hold that God's knowledge is direct.⁷⁶ "If God's experience of the temporal now does not involve a difference in his cognitive experience from moment to moment, it must be grounded in some other difference."⁷⁷ There appears to be no other difference. If there is no difference, such

⁷³Frame, *Doctrine of God* 559.

⁷⁴"An atemporal being would see all events equally vividly. Since God can do this, his experience of time, in still another sense, is very different from ours. Indeed, his relationship to time is quite unique" (Frame, *No Other God* 155).

⁷⁵"His unchangeability gives him an experience of time that is different from ours" (ibid., 154).

⁷⁶He states as much in *The Doctrine of God* (483). "It should be obvious that the extent of God's knowledge is universal. God controls the whole course of nature and history."

⁷⁷Gregory E. Ganssle, "Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now," in *God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature* 170.

direct knowledge entails atemporality. If God is equally aware of all that He knows, His direct knowledge of a present event is the same as his knowledge of a past event. But His past knowledge on a temporal model is indirect. Direct knowledge cannot span time. We have no direct knowledge of the future, but God does. Why? Because we are temporal and God is not. Direct knowledge is obviously a superior form of knowing, but it cannot be a temporal form of knowing. "If it cannot, God can know by direct awareness only those facts which persist simultaneous with his act of knowing. If God knows every fact by direct awareness, then, He must be atemporal."⁷⁸

No temporalist would consider Frame's position to make concessions in any way to their beliefs.

Conclusion

One point is all too seldom recognized: when professional philosophers and systematic theologians project modern theories that eliminate timelessness from the nature of God they do more than simply reconstruct a particular perfection of the biblical God, what they do is substitute a deity very different from the God of orthodox theism.⁷⁹

If we understand eternity as mere everlastingness, then it seems that we are in danger of reducing Him who is worshipped to the level of the creature.⁸⁰

At least some theologians and philosophers think that this discussion about atemporality is very important. Both Process Theology and Open Theism realize that their theories cannot prevail if this doctrine is entailed by theism. There is little question that the assault has begun in earnest.

Based on the research and discussion developed in this article several conclusions seem appropriate.

1. Time as it exists today cannot predate the creation.
2. Scripture presents a stronger case for atemporality than often admitted.
3. Tradition almost univocally supports atemporality.
4. Modern systematic theologians almost univocally support atemporality.
5. Apart from questionable presuppositions (libertarian freedom, dynamic view of time, arbitrary rejection of spacelessness analogies, etc.) there are no legitimate objections to timelessness.
6. There is really no downside to the atemporal position.

The real question before the church today is not whether she is going to tweak certain attributes of God but whether she is willing to revamp classical theism

⁷⁸Ibid., 167.

⁷⁹Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* 253.

⁸⁰Braine, "God, Eternity and Time" 337.

totally. Theologians and philosophers have chipped away at the edifice slowly but surely over the last two centuries. Simplicity and impassibility are receiving CPR. Immutability has been sequestered and the vultures are circling. Omniscience has been given a court date. And divine timelessness appears friendless, harried, fearful, and guilty by association.

This is not one of the popular attributes. It has not received the press that immutability or omniscience have. Most believers would probably wonder if it were even necessary. But it is pivotal. There is no such thing as partial timelessness. God either is or He is not. If He is, then all the arguments of open theist's are for naught. Timelessness poses no threat to any of the traditional teachings of theism. It only threatens the current novelties, Process Theology and Open Theism. This is not a bad place to take a stand. It is certainly a watershed. No strongly compelling or even moderately compelling reason prevails to break with those who have gone before. This writer concludes that the doctrine of eternity ought to be reaffirmed and the implication of that reaffirmation applied to interdependent attributes. It is incumbent upon those who affirm atemporality to reconsider recent adjustments to immutability and perhaps impassibility as well. If God is a timeless God, and it certainly appears that He is, then Open Theism is clearly an unorthodox version of theism and should be soundly rejected.