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John M. Fraiser,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
johnfraiser@hotmail.com

A RELATIONAL VIEW OF GOD AND TIME

Abstract

The claim set forth and defended here is that God did not create time. Rather, time is a consequence of his own action within trinitarian relationship. Thus, it exists as God does, without beginning and without end. Though there are multiple conceptions of time (physical, metaphysical, personal, etc.), common to all perspectives is the element of relational change of some variety. Time, when understood as its most basic element—change in relation, as opposed to the measurement of change or the event itself—requires an everlasting temporal God. Since God is a trinity, he has been involved in relationality, and therefore has a past, present and future. He can be said to have experiences which he has not previously had without undergoing any ontological, ethical or epistemic change. The changes that God experiences are relational changes and therefore become the foundation on which any other understanding of time is built.

Definitions of Time

Before we can properly set forth a view of God's relationship to time, it must be clear what the understanding of time is with which we are working. Augustine's sentiment concerning time is often quoted because it is easy to sympathize with: "What, then, is time? If no one asks

me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asks, I know not.”¹ So we may ask with Augustine, “What, then, is time?”

There can be no single, objective definition of time. This is because each view of time represents different aspects of the same reality, each having a range of meaning.² One’s perspective of time often varies based on her cultural background. Thus, “if anyone of these cultures begins to philosophize or theorize about time, and try to say what time is, the written or verbal results are undoubtedly as varied and legion as the stars in the sky.”³ So there are multiple ways in which one can use the simple word “time.” I want to suggest here that there are at least three perspectives one could have of time. Though one may wish to draw further distinctions, there cannot be less than these three perspectives. Any addition of further distinctions would not affect my basic thesis.⁴ The point here is that humans conceive of time in different ways in different cultures and in different time periods.⁵

Three Perspectives of Time

There are at least three ways one can conceive of time: physical time, personal time and metaphysical time.⁶ Physical time refers to the measurement of an event’s duration and change, while personal time refers to one’s awareness of time or one’s perceived place in the order of

¹ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 11.14, p. 194.

² William R. Stoeger, “God and Time: The Action and Life of the Triune God in the World.” *Theology Today* 39 (1997): 367.

³ Lawrence W. Fagg, *The Becoming of Time: Integrating Physical and Religious Time* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 250.

⁴ Fagg speaks of 5 perspectives of time: 1) Time as used, particularized, or valued; 2) Effects of Time; 3) Time and motion; 4) Time as course; 5) Ascertaining or measuring time (Fagg 249-50). I believe that there is significant overlap in some these perspectives, to the degree that several of them would fit appropriately into one category.

⁵ For examples of this comparing different time periods, see Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (London: Duckworth, 1983). For examples of this comparing different cultures, see the work cited above by Lawrence W. Fagg.

⁶ I am here building off of, but modifying, Ted Peters categories for time: Time as Passage, Time as Measurement, Time as History. (Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993], 150).

events.⁷ We may broadly define metaphysical time as simply the distinction between past, present and future. That is, one cannot have experiences of past, present and future simultaneously; one experience must go out before the next can come in. Though one could say much more to ground these definitions more concretely, the present definitions will suffice to show the multiplicity of perspectives on time.⁸

The Essential Properties of Time

In spite of the various aspects of time, there is arguably a shared essence in any conception of time, regardless of whether one can fully define her conception of time. That is, even though it is perspectival, time must have certain essential properties which permits various perspectives to be categorized as “time.” One way to determine time’s essential properties is to consider what things would be like were time taken away. Then we would be asking, “What are the required conditions for the world to be timeless?”

A timeless world would have no change or progression of any kind. Not only would things outwardly stand still, but internally one would have no thoughts or feelings. The world would remain in this state indefinitely. Timelessness would require *everything* that exists to remain unchanging. As long as at least one thing remains in time, everything else does as well because even though all other things are unchanging, the duration of their unchangingness could

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, “What is Time? And How Do We Experience It?” *Dialog* 39:1 (2000): 29.

⁸ Metaphysical Time is clearly the most abstract and distinctive of the three, so there is no problem with isolating this view of time from the others. But one may be tempted to combine the conceptions of Physical Time and Personal Time and argue that both of these are ways of measuring time, whether by one’s awareness or by one’s clock. This is possible, but it can be argued that one more naturally speaks of time as awareness than she speaks of time as physical measurement. So for example, the expression, “My, how time flies!” does not refer to physical measurement, for the person clearly understands that the physical measure is constant in this case. Rather, the person is speaking of her awareness itself, that is, change has happened in a way that the person has not been able to adjust fully yet. The person is objecting to the lack of temporal awareness not to its physical measure. There are many more examples like this one, such as when a person attends her 25-year high school reunion and says, “It seems like only yesterday, I was in high school.”

always be measured against that one thing in time. So then, whatever changes is in time, and whatever is in time changes, in some respect at least.⁹

The objections against this point seem to be minimal. Thomas Aquinas suggested a slightly modified definition, one that involves motion, stating that “the fact that we reckon before and after in movement, makes us apprehend time, which is nothing else but the measure of before and after in movement.”¹⁰ Motion serves as an *example* of change, but it does not constitute a *definition* of change. So for example, one can imagine time being measured by a series of change in thoughts; in which case, motion is not a required element of time. We also have Lawrence Fagg’s helpful reminder that while time requires change, the two should not be equated.¹¹ Nevertheless, this does not affect my conclusion that whatever changes is temporal. Sydney Shoemaker, in his foundational article, contends that it is possible that there could be changeless periods of time that can be measured in relation to periods of change, even though they do not undergo any change themselves.¹² But this is hardly a rejection of the claim that time cannot exist without change. Therefore I maintain that whatever one’s definition of time, in whatever culture or age, it must include the notion of change.

Time as Change in Relationship

But what is it about an object in time that actually changes? Any temporal object must undergo a change in relationship of some kind. So we might consider various temporal scenarios, such as a simple wristwatch. It can serve as an accurate measure of physical time because there is a change in relationship of one hand’s relation to the other hands and the face of the watch. We might imagine a more peculiar scenario, such as a possible world in which there is a rock with

⁹ Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 58.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2nd rev. ed., (New York: Benzinger Borthers Publishing, 1920), 1.10.1, p. 98.

¹¹ Fagg, 252.

¹² Sydney Shoemaker, “Time Without Change,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 66:12 (1969): 363-381.

immutable properties. Such a rock would still be temporal since it undergoes change in relationship to its surroundings, though none of its properties experience any change.¹³ Whatever temporal scenario one could envision, it would have to include a change in relationship of one object to another.¹⁴

Up to this point, I have not attempted to offer an objective definition of time. As stated earlier, it would be difficult to capture in a single statement the multiple ways in which people conceive of time. Rather, I have attempted to show that any definition of time must include the notion of change in relationship.

The sections which follow serve to briefly survey several of the arguments for and against temporality. While it will be impossible to fully satisfy each argument within the limits of this paper, my aim is to say enough about the main arguments so that it will be clear how the model I propose here would answer the primary atemporalist objections.

Did God Create Time?

Having argued that all notions of time require change and relationship, how then should we view God's relationship to time? Is time part of or a consequence of the created order, or does time exist without it? The claim I wish to defend here is that even though God created our physical astronomical measure of time, at least one category of temporality (metaphysical time) was never created, but has always existed.

Causation

¹³ I owe this example to John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 551.

¹⁴ I am using "object" here in the broadest possible sense. It need not be a physical object. One could make the same case using objects of thought (ideas). Nor does my argument require that there be two ontologically separate objects in order for there to be relationship. So for example, one may imagine a possible world in which there exists only a spinning ball. Even though it is the only existing object and has no relationship to anything else, it nevertheless is in time since each rotation has a relationship to the previous rotation. But if there were only a motionless ball, time would not exist because there is no relationship between rotations.

Much of what has been written in modern science and philosophy on the subject of causation has come about in response to theories of “Big Bang” cosmology (BBC). This is a vast area in the philosophy of science and is beyond the scope of my purpose. The view of God and time that I am arguing can be sustained without interacting with BBC models.¹⁵ Instead, I will assume here that the Christian God created the universe by supernatural means as taught in Genesis 1-2.

I am also aware of the philosophical skepticism that has risen over causation in general beginning with David Hume. Hume was correct that, from an empirical viewpoint, one cannot know precisely the cause of any effect. While we observe that there is regularity of such relationships in temporal and spatial proximity, we do not actually observe causation. Any conclusions based on our observation are simply inductive. Thus, we can never reach certainty, since we can only speak about what we have observed in the past, and cannot know what will be the case in the present, much less the future. Hume concludes that we do not actually observe causation, but only certain space-time relationships. It is important to note that Hume’s argument does not amount to a denial of the principle of causality. In fact, he affirms it. His point is only

¹⁵ Several theistic philosophers and cosmologists who are interested in God’s relationship to time have written on “Big Bang” Cosmology as well (William Lane Craig and Paul Copan, *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2004]. Gerald Schroeder, *Genesis and the Big Bang* [New York: Bantam Books, 1990], 48-54). My only point here is that since cosmology is not an “in house” discussion among theists the same way the “God and Time” question is, I need not fully enter the enormous discussion of it in order to draw some implications from the subject.

Furthermore, I do not intend to say that secular cosmologists have not given attention to the God question in relation to the origin of the universe. Many have given ample attention to question of a creator God, however, I know of none who take interest in his relationship to time. This is no surprise since secular cosmologists remain unconvinced of God’s existence. While the discussion of the origin of the universe requires them to address whether it originates from a conscious, intelligent being or random chaos, they need not theorize about such a being’s relationship to time since, in their opinion, such speculation is purely hypothetical. So, for example, Stephen Hawking is quite interested in the question of whether or not a God is necessary to explain the origin of the universe. His conclusion is that the universe is sufficient to explain itself and therefore, there is no need to posit the notion of a creator God since there would be nothing for him to do. Hawking’s non-theism, then, stops him from inquiring further. He is not interested in going on to postulate what God would be like in relation to his creation. He does not ponder whether God is transcendent/immanent, temporal/atemporal, immutable/mutable, benevolent/malevolent/ambivalent, etc. Any conception of God makes little difference to Hawking and others since they are not comfortable with a divine being of any variety (Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* [New York: Bantam Books, 1988]).

that we cannot make definitive conclusions on what is the particular cause of a given effect.¹⁶

Though one may agree with Hume's argument, it is of little consequence for the Christian discussion of cosmology since our information on the particular cause of the universe does not come from empirical means. Rather, Scripture teaches that it was God who made the universe.

The cosmological principle simply states that every event has a cause. But in order for the event to take place the cause must already exist in order to bring the event into existence. Thus, for God to even create, or cause, time to exist, he must exist temporally before it. But existing before time is an absurdity because it invokes a temporal category without time existing. Nevertheless, for God to be the cause of anything he must exist prior to it implies a temporal existence.

Some philosophers have argued that it is possible that an event could temporally precede its cause.¹⁷ While there is good reason to reject such a claim, even if it were possible, it would not affect the claim that God is temporal since, in this case, he is simply following his effect in time rather than preceding it. A retro-causal action does not affect the demand for divine temporality.

But is there ever a case in which an effect has no beginning? Is it possible that God could create the world and yet it *not* be done in time? If this is possible, this would solve the problem I have posed here. So what case can be made for God creating the world timelessly? Paul Helm

¹⁶ "For surely, if there be any relation among objects, which it imports us to know perfectly, it is that of cause and effect. On this are founded all our reasonings concerning matter of fact or existence... Yet so imperfect are the ideas which we form concerning it, that it is impossible to give any just definition of *cause*, except what is drawn from something extraneous and foreign to it" (David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. ed., Tom L. Beauchamp [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000], Section 7.2.29, p. 60.).

¹⁷ See M. Dummett, "Causal Loops," *The Nature of Time*, ed., Raymond Flood and Michael Lockwood (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 135-169. Richard Swinburne argues, however, that "the concepts of past and future cannot be connected to the rest of our conceptual scheme unless we understand the past as the logically contingent which is causally unaffected, and the future as the logically contingent which is causally effectible. Unless we suppose that, any grasp we might have on the concepts would be utterly mysterious and irrelevant to anything else" (Richard Swinburne, "God and Time," *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Honor of Norman Kretzman* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993], 214).

argues that “there need be no temporal first moment of creation, and so the universe need not have begun temporally to exist, for from the divine standpoint the universe is eternal, even though it exists contingently.”¹⁸ He goes on to say that, in speaking of God creating the world, “we are using *cause* in an unusual sense. The action is not temporal, occurring before its effect. But then arguments that causality entails time fail to compel; nor is the effect a temporal event or a series of such events, though the effect has temporal features.”¹⁹ Helm advances three reasons for God’s timeless creation: (1) God and the universe are co-eternal. (2) The universe is contingent. (3) The creation of the universe does not require a temporal beginning.

I do not see any internal problems logically with Helm’s argument. However, I have to wonder how it squares with the biblical data. Scripture makes it clear that God exists alone without the universe, not simply in a non-contingent relationship. That is, Scripture does not simply teach that the universe is contingent, as Helm argues, but that it, in fact, came into existence. In John 17:5, Christ prays to his father, “Glorify me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was.” Furthermore, the Apostle Paul writes that God “chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”²⁰ Genesis 1 also shows that God creates the universe in a temporal succession of “days.” None of these texts permits a view that the universe is eternal. To do justice to the biblical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, it is not enough to show that the universe is simply contingent. While this is true, Scripture take us further, stating that God exists alone, *prior* to the universe, and brings it into existence out of nothing. This makes Helm’s co-eternal view of creation at odds with the biblical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

¹⁸ Paul Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” *God and Time: Four Views*, ed., Gregory E. Ganssle (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 51.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰ Eph 1:4 NIV. See also, 1Pet 1:20; Mt 13:35; 24:21; 25:34; Lk 11:50; Heb 9:6; Jude 25; Rev 13:8; 17:8.

Aside from the difficulty that Helm's view faces from the biblical data, his argument also does not follow empirically. If we say that God created the world timelessly and that both God and the world are co-eternal, then the world is also timeless. A timeless world would mean that humanity, as part of the world, also exists timelessly. Thus, if God does not create the world in time, the universe and its inhabitants remain as timeless as God. But this is simply the old stasis view, or B-theory of time, which claims that all reality is really timeless. If the stasis view is correct, past, present and future are simply temporal illusions of a timeless world. Given that everything exists timelessly and that the temporal order is an illusion, we are still left with the question of how God relates to the illusion. Is he in the illusion or outside of the illusion? Furthermore, if it is an illusion, we know of no other way to live apart from the illusion, thus, this illusion is as real as it gets for us. I cannot see the difference between living in an illusory world with no access to reality versus living in a reality-based world. If an illusory world is all we know then it would serve the same purpose as a non-illusory world. So stating that the world is co-eternal does not help us much in establishing God's relationship to time, because we must still answer how a timeless God could relate to those who live by this convention called time.

Alan Padgett offers another view of how God could timelessly create the world,

Only from a *prima facie* human point of view – that is, only from a point of view within the structures of time – does the date of the effect seem to give the cause a date. Humans are naturally inclined to infer temporal causes from temporal effects. From a non-human point of view outside the structures of time, the cause of the universe need not have a date.²¹

I have to wonder how Padgett could know such a thing. If it is, as he says, only from a point of view within time that causal relationships *seem* to be temporal, how was he able to get beyond his own temporalism to gain such knowledge of atemporal causation? The only way he could know what a causal relationship is like beyond time is if someone beyond time, such as God, told

²¹ Padgett, 58.

him what it was like. Yet Padgett does not make such a claim. Rather, his argument is simply that cause and effect do not require temporal order.

While Padgett's argument is a logical possibility, *per se*, there is nothing else that can move the argument toward plausibility or probability. As time-bound creatures we have no way of conceiving of what timelessness is. We could only ever say what it is not. Furthermore, we could never experience or observe timelessness since everything we experience is temporal.

But surely there are several less controversial attributes of God about which we could make the same statements. Consider, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity. There is no logical impossibility in its traditional formulation, and it is certainly unobservable to us just like timelessness, and we have nothing else to which we can relate it. Yet, it is part of the orthodox confession of Christianity. Does this mean then that the doctrine of Trinity is faced with the same implausibility as the notion of atemporal causation? No, the key difference in the doctrine of the Trinity is that we have God's revelation in Scripture that he is a trinity which affords us all we need to affirm it with certainty.²² However, on the matter of divine timelessness, there is nothing in Scripture that requires us to affirm it.²³ So while divine timelessness may always remain a logical possibility, we need either revelation or experience if we are to hold it with any plausibility let alone certainty. Given what we know from these two epistemological sources there is no reason to affirm a timeless creation of the universe.

²² There are many biblical texts which are required to demonstrate the doctrine of the Trinity. A few of the texts typically cited in trinitarian formulation are: Dt 6:4-5; Mt 28:19; Jn 1:1; 2 Cor 13:14; Phil 2:11; Heb 1:1-4; Rev 5:12-13.

²³ I know of no atemporalist philosopher who would argue that Scripture settles the issue of God's timelessness. The arguments for divine timelessness usually follow philosophical reasoning coupled with verses of Scripture in which one concludes that God is timeless based on schemes like the Special Theory of Relativity, the incompleteness of temporal life, the problem of completing an infinite series and the immutability of God. The verses typically used to marshal support for timelessness will be dealt with below.

Temporality has in its favor, however, that God repeatedly presents himself as temporally relational. As Nicholas Wolterstorff is wont to say, “God has a history.”²⁴ Atemporalists can always respond that while history is God’s means of relating to his finite creation, the appearance of God in time need not be confused with temporality. Thus, Helm contends that God timelessly wills to act in time.²⁵

But we can only affirm that things are different than they seem if there are good reasons to do so. We would perhaps need the testimony of a reliable source (which, in this case, would have to be God himself since atemporalists contend he is the only timeless being) or we would need to experience things in themselves apart from how they seem. But, as I have argued, we lack both of these sources of knowledge with regard to timelessness. However, temporality offers evidence in both categories. God shows himself in temporal relationships in Scripture, and we have the experience of his history with us. Below, I will explore whether atemporalism has sufficient reason to reject these as true sources of knowledge for divine temporality.

Special Theory of Relativity

Having examined several arguments in favor of a temporal causation of the universe, this opens the door to discuss the Special Theory of Relativity’s role in understanding time. The argument here is that those who view time as created often treat it as a sort of temporal container. The Special Theory of Relativity (STR) creates problems for those who would view time in such a way. For example, David Burrell speaks of God as one who “contains all times.”²⁶ Similarly, Bruce Ware says that God created the space and time dimensions.²⁷ But if space and time are

²⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Unqualified Divine Temporality,” *God and Time: Four Views*, 188.

²⁵ Helm, “Response to Nicholas Wolterstorff,” *God and Time: Four Views*, 217.

²⁶ David Burrell, “Divine Practical Knowing: How an Eternal God Acts in Time,” *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*. Ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 101.

²⁷ Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 137.

aspects of relationality, then they are by-products of how one thing dynamically relates to another. Time is not a thing in itself to create. God did not say “let there be time,” as he did light. Time is not a temporal container of all actions. Instead, it is the result of change in relationality, and STR supports this.

While the application of STR is enormously complex, the theory itself is quite simple. As Richard Wolfson states, “The theory of relativity is, in its barest essence, just the simple statement that regardless of one’s state of motion the laws of physics are the same.”²⁸ This seems so simple that it would be virtually inconsequential. But the constancy of physics in all relationships means that the rate of time changes from one’s perspective relative to another’s.

This does not mean, however, that there can be no objectivity at all with respect to time. Wolfson reminds us that time’s universal aspect is that the measurements of time between two events differ in reference frames that are in relative motion.²⁹ Ironically, then, the objective fact about time is that it will not function objectively between one event moving at different speeds relative to another. Ted Peters offers an additional objective fact about time, namely, “that time still travels in one direction, from the past through the present toward the future. The theory’s insight is that it does so at varying rates.”³⁰ Wolfson agrees with this point when he says that STR does not allow us to think that events can be temporally retro-causal.³¹ But why not? If the faster something travels through space, the slower it gets, is it not possible, in theory at least, that something could travel so fast, causing time to slow down to such an extent that a slower moving world (which has a faster time) could cause an action which would only take effect in the other object’s past?

²⁸ Richard Wolfson, *Simply Einstein* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2003), 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁰ Peters, 156.

³¹ Wolfson, 133.

No, this would not be possible because the question assumes—as do those who say God created time—that time is a big temporal container of all events. The question assumes that as an object's speed increases, time is *actually* slowing down. But STR does not state that all of time slows down. Rather, time becomes slower *relative to the perspective of the stationary object*. So while one object in relationship to another has a certain rate of time, if we change an object's relationship to yet another object, the rate of time will change *relative to that object*.

At this point, one might be tempted to think that if from the stationary object's perspective, time moves slower for the object in motion, then from the perspective of the object in motion, the stationary object would be moving much faster. This, however, would be incorrect. This thought still reflects a view of time as absolute and non-relative. From both perspectives, the other object is moving slower relative to its own rate of speed. This is because there is no grand thing called time itself to which we can compare all events. Rather, as STR demonstrates, time is relative, or relational; meaning that its duration changes not absolutely, but relatively, depending on which two objects are in relation. On earth, we treat our measuring tools of time as though they are objective, and they are, for everyone in this same relative rate of speed. But change an object's rate of speed to something near the speed of light (c) relative to the earth, and our temporal measurement will not apply from the perspective of the object.

All of this is to say that the rate of duration changes depending on the perspective. There is no grand time clock, such as the sun, by which to measure everything. So then God could not have created time, because it is not a thing to create. Time is simply the by-product, or consequence, of change in relationship, and depending on the relationship in question, the temporal measure can change. So if we say that God created time, and all we mean by this statement is that God created the Sun, Moon and stars by which we, relative to earth, measure

things, then there is no harm in saying God created time. But this is not what Burrell and Ware appear to be saying.³² Rather, to them, God spoke into existence a space-time *dimension* in which all events temporally and spatially exist. If this is the case, where is the absolute time-clock against which to measure all things? For the atemporalist, the answer cannot be God, since he is timeless. Furthermore, how can such a view of time account for the fact that temporal measure changes relative to the observer?

Ironically, atemporalists frequently use STR in order to benefit their argument against the temporalist. Their argument is similar to mine, stating that since temporal measure (physical time) cannot be shown to be absolute, there is no problem with an atemporal God since it need not apply to him. If physical time changes relative to a certain object, then what is “now” for one object cannot be “now” for a different object moving at, say, $0.8c$. As Wolfson says, “Events that are simultaneous in one reference frame may not be simultaneous in another reference frame moving relative to the first.”³³ Thus, since there is no absolute “now” in the universe, God cannot be temporal because he would have to exist in many different “nows” which are at different times.³⁴

But this argument also misunderstands STR. The theory does not say that there are many different “nows,” any more than it says that there is one, absolute “now.” To say that there are many different “nows” implies that there is objectivity, instead of relativity, in STR. The “nows” are only different *relative* to another “now.” They cannot be said to be *absolutely* different “nows.” Someone’s “now” would only be affected by her speed (and again, I have to say, speed

³² Craig may also fit into this category, though he heavily qualifies his language on space-time. At times he appears to slip into thinking of it as a container rather than relationality when he speaks of absolute time. For example he uses illustrations which conceive of time like a stack of paper which can be subdivided. This is at best a confusing way of viewing temporal relativity, but it may not constitute a misunderstanding of space-time in the same way others misunderstand it (Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 60-61).

³³ Wolfson, 132.

³⁴ Brian Leftow, *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 234-35.

relative to another object). Thus, someone's travel through space affects their measurement of time *not relative to themselves, but only relative to an object not traveling at the same speed*. If I was traveling $0.8c$, time would not appear to me to be moving any slower, but my time would appear slower to everyone else back on earth. Even given that God is spatial, he still would not travel through space like we do, and neither could he be said to be stationary. God can relate to all "nows" because he is unaffected by space in this way. The point is that "nows" only need to be said to appear different to us because of our relative motion. There is no reason to think that what seem to be different "nows" for us, would be different for God.³⁵

To return to the original point, our temporal world experiences temporality relationally. Time is not absolute in the sense that everywhere, in all scenarios, in all relationships it could be measured by the same system of measurement. Thus, there is no time for God to create, instead, time is based on which relationship we happen to be considering. This argument contributes to my thesis (which I will develop below in further detail) that God is temporal because he is relational and has always been relational, or relative, as a Trinity. William Stoeger summarizes well the relational aspect of STR.

From special relativity, we discover that both space and time are not absolute, but are relative—they are given by the relationships between particles, or fundamental observers, in space-time. Thus neither space nor time can be considered as containers within which matter moves. There is no privileged frame or clock that can provide an absolute temporal or spatial reference point. Thus, time is an internal characteristic of material reality with its source in its inner relationalities. Matter (mass-energy) is ontologically prior to time and to space.³⁶

³⁵ My response to atemporalists on this point is similar to William Lane Craig's argument in *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 46-47.

³⁶ William Stoeger, "God and Time," 377.

Arguments for Divine Atemporality

Having argued the difficulty of affirming a timeless God, I want to examine some of the arguments that atemporalists advance in favor of their view. The four arguments I will examine here are generally considered by atemporalists to be their strongest arguments.

1) The Incompleteness of Temporal Life Argument

If God has a past, a present and a future, then the only experiences which are real to him are found in the present. This means that God has experiences which he can never have again. Presently they are only a memory to him, albeit a perfect memory, but a memory nonetheless, and soon what is real to him will become past and all he will have to rely on is memory once again.

However, if God is timeless, he has all of his experiences at once. The appeal of this argument is that it claims to offer a more robust theology. Timelessness is said to be a great-making property, meaning that a God who loses and gains experiences lacks perfection, since he would not possess every great-making property. As Paul Helm says,

God's fullness is such that he possesses the whole of his life *together*. To many, the idea that God is subject to the vicissitudes of temporal passage, with more and more of his life irretrievably over and done with, is incompatible with divine sovereignty, with divine perfection and with that fullness of being that is essential to God.³⁷

But this argument is effective only if it is true that having all of your experiences at once is a great-making property. What proof is there that a God who has all of his experiences at once would be better than a God who has them in succession? Consider Brian Leftow's argument where he compares God's loss of experience with a widower's loss of his wife. He concludes that even if the widower could have all of his memory in complete detail and vividness, it would

³⁷Paul Helm, "Divine Timeless Eternity," 30.

not replace the benefit of the experience of his wife.³⁸ I think I can agree with Leftow about the widower, but I cannot agree with its application to God, because it is a false analogy. Why is it that the widower's grief would not be abated if he had a perfect memory? The answer is clearly because he wants his wife back to have more experiences with her. He does not simply desire the old experiences, he wants to go on living with her making new memories. Thus, his grief is based on the fact that something has happened to him which he did not want to happen, namely, his wife's death. However, this scenario has no application to God's experiences. God does not experience, as we do, what philosophers call "time's tooth." Unlike the widower, the God of the Bible is in complete control of his experiences. Nothing happens to him which could be comparable to the widower's loss. Nothing happens contrary to his will and purpose.³⁹ Thus, to compare a widower's frustration over losing his wife to God's need to possess all of his life together is false. God purposes are not frustrated. He has no need to ever "wish" he could relive his experiences, and so for God the ability to possess all of his life in one continuous present is a superfluous quality for him. He does not need it.⁴⁰

Furthermore, it is not clear that God's life would be incomplete or less full if he did not experience all of his life at once. One has to wonder how the loss of an experience would affect God. Humans are affected by the loss of an experience because their memories are vague and incomplete, but if God's memory is perfectly vivid and complete, should he choose to "relive"

³⁸ Leftow, *Time and Eternity*, 278. This is similar to Helm's argument on the loss of experience of a cup of coffee. He argues that no matter how vivid we can imagine it, we can never taste that cup of coffee over again. And thus, if God can lose these kinds of experiences, it becomes a limitation (Helm, "Divine Timeless Eternity," 29).

³⁹ See Eph 1:11.

⁴⁰ Of course, it is always possible that one could say that God's purposes are thwarted at times, and consequently, if he possesses all of his life in the present he cannot lose the experiences which were pleasurable for him, before his purposes were thwarted. I doubt any atemporalist would argue this, however, since she is arguing that God has all the great-making properties. Saying that God's purposes could be thwarted would derail the whole project.

an experience would his perfect memory provide him less than what he needs to do so? It is hard to see how it would.

Aside from the fact that I cannot see how possessing all of his experiences at once would help God, it seems that such a quality would actually hinder him. If God is outside of time, and all events are eternally now for him, then each event is as real to him as the other. Therefore, God would be incapable of interacting with humans which do not experience an eternal “now,” but exist temporally with a past, present and future. As Anthony Kenny quipply states, “On St. Thomas’ view, my typing this paper is simultaneous with the whole of eternity. Again, on this view the great fire of Rome is simultaneous with the whole of eternity. Therefore, while I type these very words, Nero fiddles heartlessly on.”⁴¹ So then God could not interact with our temporary “now” because his “now” is eternal. As Craig notes,

God, as a temporal being, can act in a timely fashion only if He knows what time it is or where He (or His temporal part) is located, but on this theory God, in order to have the whole of His life at once, must experience the objective presentness of the whole series of events, which renders timely action impossible.⁴²

Not surprisingly, atemporalists completely reject this argument. Paul Helm argues that this argument implies temporal concepts such as simultaneity or presentness, but since he rejects notions of a temporal God of any kind, this argument against atemporality fails, even on his own view.⁴³ Suppose, though that one were to phrase the argument without temporal notions, as Helm does when he says that, “God’s fullness is such that he possesses the whole of his life *together*.”⁴⁴ But wording it this way does not mitigate the problem. Using Helm’s language of choice we can still ask, how a God who possesses all events *together* can relate to a world that does not?

⁴¹ Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 38-39.

⁴² Craig, “On the Incompleteness for Divine Timelessness from the Incompleteness of Temporal Life.” *Heythrop Journal* 38 (1997): 170.

⁴³ Paul Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” 35.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30. Emphasis is Helm’s.

Ronald Nash suggests several analogies to help understand how this could be possible. Borrowing from Augustine and Aquinas, he suggests that one think of God's relationship to the temporal world like an observer on a high hill or tower looking below to clearly see several different places at the same time which bear definite spatial relationships to each other. He also suggests the analogy of an author's relationship to the events in a novel she has written and the reader's relationship to the same events as she reads.⁴⁵ Even Helm, recognizing that they are not truly analogous, will not go near these illustrations. Both illustrations invoke time and space, while the argument for atemporality is just with respect to time. Furthermore, as Helm notes, in these illustrations, both parties are in time, while the argument for timelessness claims God is outside of time.⁴⁶ So these illustrations are false analogies.

Helm suggests that all illustrations for God's timelessness fail, and that all that can be said about God's relationship to time is *via negativa*. That is, one can only say what God is not, not what he is. So then the most that can be said is that God is *timeless*. But this is still not an adequate explanation of how an atemporal being can relate to temporal beings. If God experiences all human events as "now," then he would be unable to respond to what is for us temporal, since he does not experience them in succession. As Paul Fitzgerald states, "This makes God out to be a sort of infinitely sluggish observer of the passing scene. Contrary to what appears at first, it is a defect rather than a merit to have a specious present which is all inclusive."⁴⁷ To date, I find no sufficient answer to this problem.

The disagreement over whether or not possessing all events at once is a great-making property raises the question of methodology. How are we to go about figuring what are the great-making properties of God? Why is it that to the atemporalist, possession of all of life is a positive

⁴⁵ Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 75.

⁴⁶ Helm, "Divine Timeless Eternity," 38.

⁴⁷ Paul Fitzgerald, "Relativity Physics and the God of Process Philosophy," *Process Studies* 2 (1972): 267.

property for God, but to the temporalist it is a negative property? Both are striving to present a perfect God with all of the great-making qualities, so how do we decide which qualities those are and are not? William Stoeger rightly acknowledges that any approach which would take its cue from drawing analogies between our experience and God's (such as Leftow's widower) is "flawed from the beginning, since we have no way of testing either how adequate our concept of time and temporal reality is nor, more importantly, how adequate our concept of God is for this harmonization."⁴⁸ He goes on to say that we cannot know *a priori* what perfect qualities are for a divine being, rather it must be revealed to us. This revelation, says Stoeger, comes to us "only through accepting the divine relationships as they are revealed and given to us, appreciating them and reflecting upon their implications."⁴⁹ I assume here that Stoeger would place the revelation of God in Scripture in this category of divine relationships. Even if he does not, I consider this to be *the* interpretative grid for determining God's great making properties, and when I look to Scripture I do not see that it presents God as possessing all of his experiences at once, but rather that he is unaffected by "time's tooth."⁵⁰ It speaks of God as free from loss, decay and regret, and this is fully consummate with his temporality.

2) Space/Time Congruency

The second argument put forth by several theologians and philosophers says that what we say of God's relationship to time should also be said of God's relationship to space.⁵¹ When this is

⁴⁸ Stoeger, 368.

⁴⁹ Idem.

⁵⁰ See texts where God is contrasted with human and cosmic decay, Ps 102:23-27; Is 40:7-8; 51:6-8.

⁵¹ So Ware when he says, "When God created the world, he created all of what it is, including both its spatiality and its temporality. Both space and time then, are dimensions of the created world, and we ought to treat God's relation to each of them in the same manner" (Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 137). So also, Nelson Pike when he says, "What one says about God *vis-à-vis* time when one says that He is timeless, is precisely what one says about God *vis-à-vis* space when one says that He is spaceless" (Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* [New York: Schocken Books, 1970], 6.

done, it renders the temporalist's argument inapplicable to God. Helm follows the method of *reductio ad absurdum*. His argument is that if one rejects the timelessness of God then she has good reason to reject that God is non-spatial as well. Consequently, if one accepts the temporality of God then one has reason to accept the spatiality of God, because whatever can be said of one can be said of the other. Borrowing from Richard Swinburne's argument against atemporality, he assumes the truth of his argument and applies it in a parallel fashion to show the absurdity of Swinburne's argument.

The arguments are as follows:

Swinburne's Argument against Timelessness

- 1) God exists timelessly.
- 2) God exists simultaneously at all moments of time (from 1).
- 3) God is simultaneously present at what I did yesterday, am doing today, and will do tomorrow.
- 4) If time t_1 is simultaneous with time t_2 , and t_2 is simultaneous with t_3 , then t_1 is simultaneous with t_3 .
- 5) If God is simultaneously present at what I did yesterday and am doing today then yesterday and today are simultaneous (from 3 and 4).
- 6) But the idea that yesterday and today are simultaneous is absurd.
- 7) Therefore (1) is incoherent.

Helm's Mock Argument Against Spacelessness

- 1) God is spaceless.
- 2) God is wholly spatially present at different places.
- 3) God is wholly spatially present at what I am doing here and you are doing there.
- 4) If an individual is wholly spatially present with another individual, and that individual is wholly spatially present with a third individual then the first individual is wholly spatially present with the third individual.
- 5) Thus if God is wholly spatially present at what I am doing here and you are doing there then where you are and where I am are the same place.
- 6) But the idea that this place and that place are the same place is absurd.
- 7) Therefore (1) is incoherent.⁵²

Helm's point is that following Swinburne's logic on the matter of God and space leads us think that the spacelessness of God is absurd. But Helm thinks there is good reason to affirm the

⁵² Paul Helm, "God and Spacelessness," *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 103.

spacelessness of God, thus, his mock argument must be false and so must Swinburne's argument. I do not disagree with Helm that there is good reason to think that God is spaceless. Rather, I disagree with his (and others') dictum that what must be said of space must also be said of time and vice versa. None of the proponents of this view actually defend it. Perhaps they think it is so obviously true that it does not warrant a defense, but its truth is far from obvious. Why would one expect that God would have the same relationship to time as he does space? It seems possible that God could be non-spatial and yet temporal. I do not know of any examples non-spatial temporal entities, but lack of examples is not problematic if it can be shown that God is unique in this way.

There are two reasons why we should not affirm of God and time whatever we affirm of God and space. First, time and space possess very different qualities. Space is spatial and not temporal. Time is temporal and not spatial. Of course, this is an obvious point, but it nevertheless gives good reason not to treat them in the same way. Furthermore, objects of space are material and objects of time can be immaterial. Whatever is in space (matter) can be neither created nor destroyed. Whatever is in time (events) can come into reality and go out of reality.⁵³ This is not to say that space and time have no relationship (in fact, STR shows that they do), however, it is to say that there is a number of significant things that do not parallel and so we have no ground to assert about one what we do about the other.

Second, as Alan Padgett points out, "God can spacelessly act directly upon two different places simultaneously, because two different places can coexist at the same time. But God cannot timelessly act directly upon two different *instants*, because two different instants cannot coexist

⁵³ By this, I mean that only the present can be said to possess existence. This is what it means to be present. Neither the past nor the future can be said to possess existence. Only that which possesses existence is real. Thus the past and future are not real.

(that is, cannot be simultaneous) at the same place.”⁵⁴ So it is not as obvious as Helm might think that God must have the same relationship to time that he does to space.

3) The Impossibility of an Infinite Series

This argument picks up on the above treatment of causation. William Lane Craig has been its primary proponent. Though Craig cannot strictly be considered an atemporalist since he believes God exists timelessly “before” the creation of the world and temporally “after” its creation, atemporalists use his argument to argue for a created view of time.⁵⁵

Craig’s argument is as follows:

1. An actual infinite cannot exist.
2. A collection formed by successive addition cannot be actually infinite.
3. The series of equal past intervals of time is a collection formed by successive addition.
4. Therefore, the series of equal past intervals of time cannot be actually infinite.
5. A beginningless series of equal past intervals is an actual infinite.
6. Therefore, a beginningless series of equal past intervals of time cannot exist.
7. So, if there cannot be a beginningless series of equal past intervals of time, then time must have begun to exist.⁵⁶

This argument is the strongest of the atemporal arguments against temporal views of God and time. However, this argument ultimately fails to obtain. Craig’s point rests entirely on the premise that an actual infinite cannot have a beginning, that if a series is beginningless it can never be completed. So for example, if I have an infinite dollar amount in my bank account (given that it’s possible that an *amount* could be said to be infinite) and I am a compulsive shopper, no matter how recurrent my habit, I could never actually exhaust the account (or

⁵⁴ Padgett, 137. There seems to me an easier way to demonstrate Padgett’s point.

God acts spacelessly on two different places at the same time. (possible)
 God acts timelessly on two different times at the same place. (impossible)

⁵⁵ See Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 37-38.

⁵⁶ I have actually combined two separate arguments of Craig’s. Points 1, 5, 6, 7 comprise Craig’s first argument (*Time and Eternity*, 221), while points 2-4 comprise a second argument (*Time and Eternity*, 227).

diminish it for that matter). On a less lucrative level, when applied to the idea of an infinity of past intervals of time, such as is required for an uncreated view of time, Craig argues that no matter how far a temporal God would try to move from an infinite past, he has just as far to go. Thus, God could never reach a point of creation because he will always have just as far to go to get there.

Craig also offers a more concrete example to help understand his argument. The illustration is called “Hilbert’s Hotel,” which he borrows from the German mathematician David Hilbert.⁵⁷ If we imagine a hotel with an infinite number of rooms in which all of the rooms are full, should a traveler come in to ask for a room, the desk clerk could offer two answers, either, “Sorry, there are no vacancies,” or “Sure, I’ve got one more room.” According to Craig, either response would be correct.

The first answer is obviously correct because although there are an infinite number of rooms, there is an infinite number of guests occupying them as well. But the second answer would also be correct, since the desk clerk could just have each hotel guest move to the next room, and the new guest would take room #1. Strangely, though one more guest was just added, there are no more guests in the hotel than there were before, because the number is infinite. If one guest could be accommodated, so could an infinite number of new guests. It is no more problematic to add an infinite number of guests to Hilbert’s Hotel than it is to add one. An infinite number plus an infinite number is still just an infinite number.

Now suppose that the next day, all of the guests in the odd-numbered rooms decide to check out, leaving only the even-numbered rooms occupied. Are there now fewer guests in the hotel than there were before? The answer has to be, “No.” But then suppose that the even-

⁵⁷ Craig borrows this illustration from George Gamow, *One, Two, Three, Infinity* (London: MacMillan, 1946), 17. Cited in Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 222.

numbered rooms become vacated as well, instantly the whole hotel is empty, even though the same number of guests checked out as last time. Although it is an intriguing place, all of this clearly shows Hilbert's Hotel to be an absurdity, but Craig wants to use it to show the absurdity of an actual infinite series, altogether. So does it work?

Craig seems to be working with several false presuppositions about infinite series that prevent his analogies, as well his main argument, from working. First, he assumes that an infinite series of past events must actually *arrive* at infinity. Second, Craig assumes that the analogy of Hilbert's Hotel corresponds to the idea of an infinite series of past events. Third, he assumes that infinite time for God can be added up the way we add numbers by successive addition.

There is no reason to require that an infinite series of past events arrive at infinity. Indeed it cannot. Because infinity is not an actual number, it makes no sense to treat it as such. Consider point 5 from Craig's argument, "A beginningless series of equal past intervals is an actual infinite." This is to say that it is impossible that time could not have a starting point, because it would never arrive at an infinity. But there is no problem here. Why would we expect to arrive at infinity? Why would we set such an unattainable goal for ourselves? Craig's point on actual infinities is the same as saying that the unattainable (=infinity) cannot be attained (=completing an infinite series). This statement is true, but there is no reason to think that an infinite series needs to have an end or a beginning in order for God to create in time. If, as Craig acknowledges, there is no first moment of eternity past and an infinite amount of time has already passed, has not time already *arrived* at infinity? At every point has not time already turned over an infinite number of events?⁵⁸ An actual infinite need not be the *completion* of the series; infinity, by

⁵⁸ Wes Morriston, "Must Metaphysical Time Have a Beginning?" *Faith and Philosophy* 20:3 (2003): 290. This argument is similar to Alvin Plantinga's argument against Kant's antinomy concerning the question of whether the universe had a beginning. Plantinga responds to Kant's claim that it is impossible for an infinite series to be completed by saying, "The premise tells us that if you start from some finite point in a series—that is, some point finitely far from the *beginning* of the series—and add a finite number per unit of time you will never complete the series, then you will never complete the series. Fair enough; but if the world has existed for an infinite stretch of

definition makes this is impossible. All that is needed to possess an actual infinite is the promise of an ongoing succession. Craig's concern over actual infinities, as he understands it, pertains only to eternity past, and not to eternity future. He maintains that eternity future is really no eternity at all since in our succession of events we have a definite number at every moment. Thus, even after any given year in eternity future we never have an infinite number we only have a finite one. But if we, in fact, are warranted to believe that the future is open-ended, having the expectation, and promise, that it will go on continuously, do not we have an infinite of at least the potential variety? And then, if every future event, though unknown to us, but known to God, can be assigned a number, would not the numbering be an infinite number of the actual variety this time? So while an actual infinite series may not have much relationship to us, it is hard to see why it cannot relate to a God that is already said to be infinite in so many other ways as well.

I am not saying that our physical time is infinite. In fact, our physical measure was created by God, but this is not all that there is to temporality. So while our physical measure may have come into existence, temporality as a category itself need not be a created thing, since time for God need not be exactly like ours.

On the matter of Craig's second presupposition, his comparison between Hilbert's Hotel and a beginningless count is faulty. In the case of Hilbert's Hotel, we have three elements that affect the conclusion: the guests, the rooms, and the infinite number. In the case of a beginningless count we have only two elements—the events and infinite numbers. The clear absurdity of Hilbert's Hotel results because of the transient nature of the guests with respect to the rooms. The rooms and guests can change their relationship in an infinite number of combinations, but a beginningless count cannot function in this way. The temporalist's argument

time, then there *was* no first moment, no first event, and no beginning either to the series of moments or the series of events; more generally, at any preceding moment an infinite time would *already* have elapsed" (Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 25).

does not treat past events like hotel guests that can be moved around from room to room. The hotel rooms and hotel guests are co-existent, and thus, can share a simultaneous relationship that events on a timeline cannot. Therefore, it is a false analogy to extend the absurdity of Hilbert's Hotel and similar analogies to other infinite series which are incapable of the kind of alteration possible in the analogy.⁵⁹

Craig's third presupposition is also indefensible, since it is always possible that infinity past is not measured by our physical time, or, for that matter, measurable at all. Can we be sure that for God, time is not dense? In other words, is it not possible that, when considering two distinct times, there could be a third time compressed between these two?⁶⁰ What if time diminishes at a constant half-life, as it were, so that one event takes eight minutes, the next four minutes, the next two minutes, the next one minute and so on? An eternity would happen rather quickly with dense temporality.⁶¹ This does not suggest that God does, in fact, relate to time in this way, but only that Craig could never know that he doesn't. And thus, as long as that possibility remains, there is the chance that the problem is not with beginningless time, but with Craig's assumptions about what beginningless time must be for God. If God experiences time before creation in just the metaphysical sense of relational change, then there is no problem with him existing infinitely and creating the world in time. This would then mean that all that exists before creation is metaphysical time, but with creation, both metaphysical time and a way of measuring it (physical time) exist as well.

Craig's final argument against actual infinities is that even if we could grant that a beginningless series is possible, and "we meet a man who claims to have been counting from eternity and is now finishing: . . . , -3, -2, -1, 0, we could ask, why did he not finish counting

⁵⁹ Ibid., 296.

⁶⁰ Oppy, "Time, Successive Addition, and *Kalam* Cosmological Arguments," *Philosophia Christi* 2:3 (2001): 183.

⁶¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian*, 25.

yesterday or the day before or the year before? By then an infinite time had already elapsed, so that he should have already finished.”⁶²

Arguing that it is possible that an event could have just as easily occurred earlier than when it actually does occur does not prove that the occurrence of such an event is impossible. There are many scenarios that we know quite well to be real and yet, from our perspective, they could have just as easily occurred at a different time. Following Craig’s argument, we could ask about any event why it occurred now instead of at a different time? And while we may want to know the answer to this question, if we never come up with one, it does not give us sufficient cause to doubt that the event ever happened. As Wes Morriston questions, “Why couldn’t CQ [this] be one of those big questions that simply cannot be answered? Why couldn’t it have a status comparable to that of other “stumpers” such as: Why is there anything at all? Or: Why *these* laws of nature?”⁶³

Craig’s question, then, with regard to God, is simply, why did he not create the world sooner? If I lack the answer to this question, it may show my ignorance on the matter, but it cannot show that God does not have a good reason to create when he did. Perhaps, God does have a good reason and just hasn’t told me. We may speculate about different reasons why God would create at a certain point and not at another, such as Brian Leftow does, but we need not prove our speculation in order to maintain that God has a good reason.⁶⁴

4) Divine Immutability

⁶² Craig, *Time and Eternity*, 227.

⁶³ Morriston, 293.

⁶⁴ Leftow’s suspects that “God can delay creating to enjoy anticipating a universe and/or desiring to create one.” (Leftow article 163). Thomas Senor also speculates that God delayed creating because, “Perhaps it would somehow be inappropriate if creation were eternal; perhaps that would foster the false view that the world is metaphysically independent of God.” (Thomas D. Senor, “Divine Temporality and Creation *Ex Nihilo*,” *Faith and Philosophy* 10:1 [1993]: 89-90).

Many atemporalists, working off of the arguments of various theologians throughout church history, want to affirm an unchanging God, claiming that if he is unchanging, then he is timeless. According to Millard Erickson, “God is timeless. There are no variations in his nature at different points within his existence. The interests, knowledge, activities, and even personalities of humans change from childhood to youth to adulthood to old age. With God there is no such change, however.”⁶⁵ Recalling the answer to the previous question of how a God who possesses all of his life at once could relate to a world that doesn’t, there is good reason to think that a completely immutable God would be unable to relate to a changing world. In fact, some in the history of the church have portrayed him in just this way. As Justin Martyr writes,

The ineffable Father and Lord of all does not come anywhere nor walk nor sleep nor rise up, but in his own place, wherever it is, he remains, seeing piercingly and hearing piercingly, without eyes and without ears but with inexpressible power. He is not moved, but he is incomprehensible by space and by the whole world, indeed he existed even before the world did. How could a being like this speak to anyone or become visible to anyone or appear on the smallest part of the earth? ⁶⁶

Today, however, many theologians have recognized that God must be mutable in some way, if he is to relate to human history and act in his creation.⁶⁷ This view does not threaten God’s ontological, ethical, or epistemic immutability. That is, this view upholds that God cannot change in his essence or nature, his goodness, or his knowledge. However, to experience change, God need not experience a change with regard to these divine attributes. Scripture speaks clearly on the matter of God’s unchanging nature. The Psalmist writes, “Of old you founded the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands. Even they will perish, but you endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing you will change them and they will be changed.

⁶⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 300.

⁶⁶ Justin Martyr, *Selections from Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, ed. and trans. R. P. C. Hanson (London: Lutterworth Press 1963), 76.

⁶⁷ See for example, Bruce A. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29:4 (1986): 431-46. Also, John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 559-72.

But you are the same, and your years will not come to an end.”⁶⁸ The author to the Hebrews says of Christ that he is the same yesterday, today and forever.⁶⁹ And, “before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” But this does not mean that God cannot experience relational change with regard to humanity and creation. In fact, God presents himself as undergoing change in many places in Scripture. So, in response to the repentance of the Ninevites, Jonah 3:10 says, “When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.” It is over this very fact that Jonah expresses his frustration when he says, “In order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.”⁷⁰ Here, Scripture presents God as changing with regard to his relationship to humanity, particularly the Ninevites, but this poses no threat to the immutable character of God. In fact, his change of mind, comes about precisely because of his immutable character. That is, God is immutable in showing mercy to those who repent. However, while he is immutable in his character, he does change in his relationship to them from wrath to love.

But does all of this imply that God is temporal? Is it not possible that Scripture is just presenting him in anthropomorphic ways? Helm takes this route, arguing that “it is a logically necessary condition of dialogue that each of the partners in the dialogue should appear to act and react in time. If dialogue between God and humankind is to be real and not make-believe, then God cannot represent himself (in his role as dialogue partner) as wholly immutable, for then dialogue, real dialogue, would be impossible.”⁷¹ But if God is only represented as mutable in

⁶⁸ Ps 102:25-27.

⁶⁹ Heb 13:8.

⁷⁰ Jonah 4:2.

⁷¹ Helm, “Divine Timeless Eternity,” 45.

order to make real dialogue possible, what does this do to those of us who discover, like Helm, that God is not *really* mutable, but is only passing himself off as such? It seems to me that such dialogue between God and man can serve its purpose only as long as we think he is immutable in this way. But those of us who know better would have to tell ourselves that although God is representing himself as such, we know that this is not what he is really like.

I do not deny that there is language of accommodation in Scripture.⁷² In fact, it is an effective way to communicate an infinite God to finite humanity. However, why must we think that texts that speak of God as relating to humanity in time are accommodative? Are there other clearer texts of Scripture that would offset a belief that God relates to his world temporally and thus suggest that these temporal verses be seen as accommodative? If there are, Helm does not tell us what they are.

As Ware points out, “We once were ‘children of wrath, like the rest of mankind’ (Eph. 2:3), but now by faith we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places ‘so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus’ (Eph. 2:7). How can we fail to recognize here that a change has taken place in God’s disposition toward us?”⁷³ But Helm’s view requires that God have all of his experiences together. Following this view, God maintains his wrath against the believer all the while affirming his mercy to her, since he is incapable of relational change. Far from being a quality of perfection, complete immutability would seem to be a deficiency for God. While advocates of complete immutability may not like this conclusion, this is nevertheless where their view is asking us to go.

Atemporalists must ask, as Justin Martyr does, “How could a being like this speak to anyone or become visible to anyone or appear on the smallest part of the earth?” I do not think that in

⁷² I am thinking of such texts which attribute body parts, and sensation to God (Ps 11:4 [eyelids]; Gen 8:21 [sense of smell]). We have good reason to think that these are examples of accommodation. Other texts present God as invisible (Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17; Heb 11:27), and as a spirit (Jn 4:24; 2 Cor 3:17).

⁷³ Ware, *God’s Greater Glory*, 142.

affirming God's relational change we are losing anything of the biblical God, on the other hand, a God as ineffable as is required by complete immutability, is incapable of real relation in real time.

A Word on Hybrid Views of God and Time

Recently, some philosophers and theologians have made attempts to combine the divine timelessness and divine temporality models, concluding that in one sense God is outside of time and that in another sense he is inside of time.⁷⁴ I have no problem with these attempts. However, there are some matters of disagreement between atemporalists and temporalists which cannot be combined. While the attempt to find commonality among these opposing views is beneficial, my primary concern is over the questions I have raised in this paper, such as: did God create time? Is an actual infinite series possible? Is God relationally mutable or completely immutable? What are the essential properties of time? About these questions there cannot be a "both/and" answer. Either God created time or he didn't. An actual infinite is either possible or it isn't. God is either relationally mutable or he isn't. Either time has change and relationality as essential properties or it doesn't.

There are certain senses in which God could be understood as timeless. He is, after all, free from any negative effects that temporality brings with it, such as decay, regret or boredom. His knowledge is not bound by temporal limits as our knowledge is; he knows intensively all that is past, present and future. Time never changes outside of his control. Since the converse of all these things is part of what it means for us to be in time, I can agree that God may be considered to have certain timeless characteristics.⁷⁵ However, hybrid views are not nearly this reserved in

⁷⁴ So William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity*; Alan G. Padgett, *God, Eternity and the Nature of Time*; Bruce A. Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 133-39; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 543-75.

⁷⁵ My own view is quite similar to Alan G. Padgett's in this respect.

attributing timelessness to God. Consider Craig's view, for example, that "before" creation he was timeless in every sense of the word, and by creating he took on temporality in order to relate to his creation. This is a clear affirmation of both timelessness and temporality, without redefinition of what it means to be timeless or temporal. A proper critique of Craig's view of God and time requires more than a passing comment. I would, however, argue that hybrid views, are often fraught with contradiction because of their desire to have it both ways.

Time and Trinitarian Relationship

God's changingness as I have presented it, does not pertain to his being, goodness, knowledge or power. But for God to be in relationship he must experience real change. And if he experiences change, then he must be temporal. The foundation for God's relational change is his trinitarian relationship, and thus this relationship becomes the foundation for time itself, since time requires change and relationality. "Time and temporal reality as we know them issue from God's temporal eternity—they are finite expressions of the dynamics of God's own interior life and of the essentially interrelated communion of the divine persons in being outside God's self."⁷⁶ If indeed we consider the ontological Trinity to be relational—and not simply the economical Trinity—then the essence of God is to be in relationship. Thus, God need not have created time, because it has always existed as the by-product of his own personal relationality. He does not need his creation in order to be relational, because he is in himself, and among the Godhead, fully relational.

In what way was God in relationship before he created the world? For this answer we can only turn to the biblical text. John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word was God." In John 17:5, Jesus prays to the Father, "Restore to me the

⁷⁶ Stoeger, "God an Time," 366.

glory which I had *with* you before the world was.” Each of these verses implies real relationship. To be “with” God does not mean to be next to him or around him or simply in his presence, but to have relationship. This is similar to what the Apostle Paul speaks of when he says of the second coming in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, “and so shall we always be *with* the Lord.” The benefit of being with the Lord is clearly the aspect of relationship.

Before creation, the divine Trinity is involved in relationship. But does this relationship grow? Does the Son grow to love the Father more with each new experience? An affirmative answer would create some severe theological problems. Though the Father and the Son do not grow in their relationship, they can nevertheless have experiences with each other which they did not have previously. These experiences do not contribute growth to their relationship, but rather are expressions of the fullness of divine love in a relationship of giving and receiving that is already there. Thus, they can experience changes in relationship without experiencing growth or retraction in it. While we may not be able to conceive of what kind of new experiences the persons of the Trinity have, we need not think that they are always and only involved in the same activity (or in inactivity). At the risk of over-simplification, I can think of each person of the Trinity having new experiences of: 1) relishing in their divine plan, 2) speaking words of love to one another and 3) enjoying the beauty of creation; all without coming to love each other with more intensity. Even if they have had similar experiences before, they have not had *these* experiences before. These experiences do not require that the members of the Godhead grow in their relationship as a result of these new experiences, since it is possible that each one of these acts simply be the expression of a love that is already perfect. Surely perfect love still demands expression. Whether or not these three examples are actually how the members of the Trinity relate to each other or not, we can see how it is possible to have new experiences and yet not

grow as a result of having them. These divine changes of relation then are temporal and are the basis for any other function of time. God's trinitarian experiences may be immeasurable by our standards, but they are still temporal. Thus, in describing God's relationship to time, time may be said to exist "with" God. Time cannot exist without him because it is necessitated by his divine relation.

Though relationality is first and foremost among the Godhead, this is not the sole expression of his relationality. It also extends to us as well. His own interrelation becomes the reason he can also be present in the course of our narrative sequence. It becomes the grounds for the Son's incarnation in human history and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in human hearts.⁷⁷ If we are relational, it is because we are made in God's likeness and therefore his relationality (albeit, we possess a finite and fallen expression of it).⁷⁸ There is no reason to think that temporality belongs entirely to the creature/creator distinction. Certainly Scripture itself draws distinctions between time for us and time for God,⁷⁹ but temporality itself requires its origin in God's own relationality, and thus we share in it as creatures made in his image and as his covenant children with whom he has entered into fellowship with in real time and real space.

Though much more needs to be said about divine relationship, the above explanation is sufficient to show that God exists temporally because he changes relationally.

⁷⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Eternity, Time and the Trinitarian God," *Dialog* 39:1 (2000): 12.

⁷⁸ There are many more theological implications of my proposed model that extend beyond the scope of this paper. For example, one could explore the eschatological effects of Christ redeeming our fallen temporality, freeing us from the adverse effects of it and bringing it in to unity with God's temporality which has no more "mourning, crying or pain" because he is "making all things new" (Rev 21:4-5).

⁷⁹ "Of old you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. Even they will perish, but you endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing you will change them and they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will not come to an end" (Ps 102:25-27).

Conclusion

Time requires change, and change requires relationship. Whatever the definition of temporality, one must award it these characteristics. Thus, we may construct the principle that whatever changes is in time and whatever is in time changes. Since Scripture presents God as relational and as undergoing changes relationally, he may be understood to be temporal. Furthermore, there are several other good arguments to bolster the belief that God changes relationally and is therefore temporal. The argument from causation requires that temporality must already be in place prior to God's creation of the universe. The argument from STR further supports God's temporal relationality since it demonstrates that time itself is based on relationality. Finally, there are good reasons to reject the arguments typically advanced in favor of divine atemporality. This puts us in position to understand our temporality as rooted in God's temporality as expressed in the interrelationality that he has always enjoyed as a trinity.