

## Critical Comments on God and Time

By: Dan Mages

This is one of those issues that seem so abstract and otherworldly that I have a difficult time wrapping my mind around it. Dr. Brown followed classical theism in saying that God is timeless, that God is not a physical entity; that time is a property created by God, a dimension of the physical. Maybe it is my scientific ignorance that is hindering me from comprehending this concept, but I presently do not think that time is physical, a property, something that can be placed in a test tube so to speak.

Christians typically speak of God as living outside of time. It is usually said in such a way that exudes confidence that they know and grasp what they are talking about. When pushed to explain, there is usually some reference to time being one dimension, or a reference to 2 Pet 3:8 is given, which states, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (NIV). This is taken to mean that to God, there is no such thing as time. Conversely, I think this passage is evidence that God does experience a succession of moments as we do. The difference is that we think a thousand years is a long time in reference to our short mortal lives, whereas as thousand years to God is “like a watch in the night,” according to the Psalm which the writer of 2 Peter was quoting from (90:4). Again, relative to the everlasting life of God, a thousand years is like a day. However, it is important to recognize the comparison that is taking place. The text is not making a metaphysical statement about God existing outside of time, whatever that would mean, but in context, pointing out that God is patient and that he will keep his promise, even if it seems like a long time to us. According to the passage, God’s purpose in waiting is that more people would repent and therefore not perish when the judgment begins.

It is worth considering another text. God is said to be the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8). This text does not speak of God as merely “is” as if God was still in the past just as God is in the present. The past is just that, past, no one and nothing but the memory of the past remains.

If time is not seen as a metaphysical property, but instead conceived as a word that we use to describe a succession of moments, I think we can speak more meaningfully and accurately. If we continue to use the traditional notion of God as timeless, I think we just cause confusion in people's minds and ultimately end up with Christians who use words without understanding their meaning. I think it is nonsense to say that right now, God is with me yesterday. Christians often imply this use of language when they say that God exists in the past, present, and future all at the same time. I think it is more proper to say that God was with me yesterday, over and against that nonsensical language God is with me yesterday, right now. I tend to agree with Nicolas Wolterstorff that God is everlasting, not eternal, the former has reference to existence as we experience it, the latter, to some ethereal, static, philosophic state of being that nobody quite grasps or understands. Even the word *olam* in Hebrew and *aion* in Greek have reference to an age, or ages, that is, a period of time. These words as used by the Hebrews did not have reference to being outside of time in what theologians and philosophers termed the "eternal now."

Lastly, Scripture speaks of God as a living being. Living beings think, act, emote, change, make decisions, take in information, experience their surroundings and so forth. Reading the Bible and not coming to this conclusion is rare, yet what usually takes place is that traditional theologians will acknowledge this but then negate this by saying God is timeless, impassible, immutable, and foreknows the future exhaustively. In doing so, I think they ultimately end up saying nothing meaningful at all. To say that I am a person filled with strong emotions and then turn around and state that I am a human with no emotions whatsoever is to communicate nothing. Each statement negates the other. This is what I see conventional theologians doing by accepting the biblical narrative and adding the concepts mentioned earlier. This should make sense, but unfortunately many have allowed what they call paradoxes in their worldview. By doing so, they have inadvertently accepted clear contradictions, but soften the reality of such by claiming knowledge that is "above reason." I think we do well to follow thinkers who steer clear from contradictory theologies, and philosophies.