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ETERNITY

1. Biblical data
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1. Biblical data. Isaiah 57:15 contains the phrase, “the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy.” This is the only verse in which the word occurs in the KJV. The same Heb. Word עד is in Isaiah 9:6, “Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” In Daniel there occurs עלם in the phrases “everlasting kingdom” and “everlasting dominion.” Most frequently in the OT, the word for eternity or eternal is עולם or עלם, as in everlasting covenant, everlasting priesthood, underneath the everlasting arms, the everlasting God, and some sixty other occurrences. There is also the word קדמה in Deuteronomy 33:27 “The eternal God is your dwelling place.”

In the NT, *αἰώνιος* is used as eternal damnation, eternal life, eternal purpose, the King eternal, and so on. The Eng. Word *everlasting* also trs. the same word, with perhaps a single exception, for Jude 6 has “everlasting chains” (*αἰδῖος*). This latter is also the word in Romans 1:20, “his eternal power and deity.”

In addition to these verbal instances of eternal or everlasting, the Bible has much to say about the nature of God. From this other material, even more than from the verbal occurrences, one must learn what eternity means.

The simplest teaching of Scripture is Psalm 90:2, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.” This is a denial that God ever began to exist in time. On the surface the words seem to ascribe to God never-ending duration. Involved of course is the divine creation of the world at a point of time in the finite past; practical lessons concerning the certainty of the covenant are implied, but the nature of God Himself is here characterized as one of infinite duration.

Both the OT and the NT contain anthropomorphic and other metaphorical language. God is said

to have ears and eyes, and the mountains skip like rams. Metaphorical language is not unusual. Literature and ordinary conversation make frequent use of figures of speech. Therefore, when God is described as one who exists in time, and is also described as a temporal being, words must be determined whether they may be fig. anthropomorphic expressions.

Geerhardus Vos in his *Biblical Theology* notes that the prophets represent God as dwelling in heaven, unlimited by space, and yet they also say that He dwells in Zion and that Canaan is His land. Then Vos continues, “The same relation applied as between Jehovah and time. In popular language, such as the prophets use, eternity can only be expressed in terms of time, although in reality it lies altogether above time.” One must therefore look beyond the metaphorical expressions.

2. Theological analysis. Time and temporality is usually connected with change and motion. Things in time have a beginning, they develop in stages, and come to an end. But the Bible teaches that God is immutable. Hebrews 1:10-12 says, “The heavens are the work of thy hands; they will perish, but thou remainest . . . and they will be changed. But thou art the same.” The idea of immutability helps in understanding of eternity, for if God is immutable, if He has no beginning or end, if He does not change or move, can one say He exists in time? Is not another mode of existence—eternity—necessary? Stephen Charnock wrote an excellent volume on the *Existence and Attributes of God*. In the discourse on the “Eternity of God” he says:

“Time hath a continual succession We must conceive of eternity contrary to the notion of time; as the nature of time consists in the succession of parts, so the nature of eternity is an infinite immutable duration. Time began with the foundation of the world; but God being before time, could have no beginning in time. Before the beginning of the creation and the beginning of time, there could be nothing but eternity . . . for as between the Creator and creatures there is no medium, so between time and eternity there is no medium (Charnock: *Existence and Attributes of God* [1873], pp. 280-2820).

That God is not in time seems harder for some people to understand than that he is not in space. No Christian conceives of God as bounded by space, even though space be infinite in extent. Contrariwise, space is in God, or, at least, “In him we live and move and have our being.” Even when one says he has his being in God, the literal spatial meaning is not intended. We are not in God as we are in New York or Chicago.

Because it is recognized that God is not in space, and because it is usually supposed that space

and time are in some way analogous, it should not be so surprising that God is not in time either, even though time be infinite. Of course, if time and space are not infinite, it is more obviously necessary to maintain that God is not in time. The reason I that if time began at the creation of the world, one must not suppose that God began to exist; therefore He must have an eternal existence outside of time.

3. Philosophy of time. The line of argument begins to clarify that in large measure the discussion of eternity is really an investigation of time. What is time? What a theologian or philosopher says of time will color his view of eternity.

Aristotle said that time is the measure of motion. Bodies move through space, and the number of motion is time. For Aristotle, the physical world always existed; motion never began and will never end; therefore time never began and will never end. In such a view, a god can be both temporal and everlasting, if he were a physical object or were in some way dependent on body. Nontemporal eternity could be asserted of a mathematical theorem or abstract concept, for truth is not a body and does not change. Aristotle's god—the unmoved mover, a pure form, free of all matter—can also be called eternal. Although a Christian cannot accept Aristotle's concept of God, he might accept the definition of time. In this case, God would be called eternal, for obviously the Biblical God could not be subject to the numbering, or the numerable aspect, of physical motion.

Aristotle will suffice as an example of pagan antiquity. Before considering any Christian thinker, it would be wise to examine a non-Christian philosopher of modern times. Immanuel Kant defined space and time as the two a priori forms of sensory intuition.

His meaning can be explained briefly as follows: Ordinary or empirical intuitions, such as the sensations of blue, loud, rough, bitter, acrid, vary from person to person. But all men see everything as in space, and their ideas all change in time. Because the contents of experience are so varied, whereas space and time are the same, it follows that the knowledge of space and time cannot be derived from experience. The history of British empiricism, which made the attempt and failed, supports this conclusion. As a priori forms independent of experience, space, and time are not only infinite (as no object of experience can be), but they are also universal and necessary, forming the basis of the necessary truths of mathematics, none of which sort can be learned empirically.

Therefore, concludes Kant space and time are the innate, or as he calls them, the a priori forms of intuition. The contents of experience are poured into the mind, as hot jelly is poured into a jelly glass, and they take the shape of the mind. It is similar to the ordinary phenomenon of perspective on a profounder level. One sees parallel lines converging in the distance. This convergence is due to the mind: it is the way one sees. So too, trees and rocks are in space because that is the way one sees, and

sensations follow one another in time because that is the way one arranges them.

A Christian, however, cannot accept Kant's philosophy *in toto* any more than he can Aristotle's. If he accepts Kant's theory of time, consistency will require him to make God non-temporal. God has no optic nerves, no tongue, no tympanum. God has no sensations. Therefore God, though He may know things as they are in themselves, cannot impose time on God, because God is not a sensory object to be seen. His status may then be called eternal.

4. Augustine's view. Secular philosophers, such as Aristotle and Kant, paid no attention to the Christian doctrine of creation; on the other hand, Christian theologians usually pay little attention to the nature of time. Hence their ideas of eternity are confused or at least incomplete. Augustine, however, the great philosopher-theologian of the 5th cent., tried to work out a systematic theory.

Rejecting pantheism and emanationism, Augustine asked how God could create the world, time, and change out of nothing, though He Himself is immutable. God must be immutable because if He changed He would become either better or worse, and both are impossible for a perfect Being.

Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," attributes a beginning to created things. Because time is somehow connected with change, it too must have been created and must have had a beginning. No time could have preceded the world, for a preceding time would require God to choose one moment rather than another for the act of creation, and this would have been irrational. But, if time began at creation, God himself, because immutable, because unchanging, is Eternal, and with respect to Him there is no before or after.

Human misunderstandings of eternity arise through the illegitimate comparison of two heterogeneous types of duration. These two modes are based on two types of being: created, changing being, and uncreated, changeless being. Because man knows virtually nothing about the being of God, he naturally has an incomplete idea of eternity. Man's possibilities are largely confined to his own changing being and time.

Time itself, continued Augustine, is difficult enough to understand. Aristotle, brilliant though he was, misunderstood it, for time can be neither motion itself nor its numerable aspect. The same motion can occur in different lengths of time, and those motions are measured by something that is not an attribute of motion. Thus, Augustine spends several pages in his *Confessions* refuting Aristotle.

Augustine's own view begins with the admitted fact that man can and does measure time. But man cannot measure what is not present to him. Hence man could not measure past time unless, strangely, it were present. A physical past, such as a motion yesterday, cannot be present. It is past and gone; but the human mind can make the past present intellectually. Man remembers. The existence and

continuity of time, therefore, are the work of man's spirit. It is the nature of mind to preserve a series of past events in the present.

Augustine's words are, "In thee, O my spirit, I measure time The Impression that passing things leave in Thee remains when they are gone. It is that present impression that I measure, not the past things. It is that impression that I measure when I measure time. Therefore either that impression is itself time, or I do not measure time" (*Confessions*, XI, xxvii).

By thus making time depend on perception and memory—a view roughly similar to that of Kant—Augustine preserves the doctrines that God is eternal. An omniscient Being could not have a series of perceptions one after another, for such a series implies that the mind does not know something and later perceives and knows it. But omniscience means that the divine Mind is never ignorant of anything. He neither loses an idea He once had nor gains one He previously did not know. Therefore, there can be no temporal succession in God's knowledge. He is not subject to the form of time. Finite beings, who know and do not know, are temporal; but the infinite and omniscient God is eternal.

5. Some modern views. Contemporary theologians also discuss eternity and time, but it is not clear that they have improved upon the great thinkers of the past. For example: F. R. Tennant produced a massive analysis of time, but "we still lack a theory as to the nontemporal serial order which manifests itself in time" (*Philosophical Theology*, Vol II, p. 138), and if he does not bluntly deny that God is timeless, at least he denies creation.

Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, has a chapter entitled "Time and Eternity." It is short and disappointing. The book might better have been called *Christ and History*, for it contains no theory of time, and it is unclear whether or not he thinks that God is eternal.

Cullman makes a sound observation when he remarks that the Scripture nowhere discusses time and eternity in any philosophical manner. As was said earlier, the nature of eternity must be gathered by implication from what the Scripture teaches about God's immutability, independence, and sovereignty. The explicit message of Scripture, instead of stating these implications, uses the idea of eternity for the practical purpose of engendering in the worshipers truths and confidence in God.

6. Practical applications. Because God is eternal, His decrees must be eternal, for He could never have existed without thinking or willing them. He can accomplish His decrees because He is almighty, but He could not be almighty without being eternal. A being who is at times ignorant could not be almighty.

What confidence could man have in any of God's attributes, such as His mercy, wisdom,

righteousness, goodness, and truth, unless He were immutable, eternal and almighty? How could man entertain hope of a resurrection unless God were everlasting?

How could man rely on God's covenant, if He was not eternal? The covenant is founded on the eternity of God who “desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he interposed with an oath, so that through the two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us” (Heb 6:17, 18).

In times of distress, decline, or apostasy, the doctrine of the eternity of God provides assurance and comfort. The God who never was born cannot die; and although declension and unbelief may corrupt the visible Church, the eternal God has said, “I will build my church, and the powers of death [or the gates of Hades] shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

The concept of eternity, the philosophical theories of time, and the carefully extended implications from Scripture may seem to be too technical and far removed from a living religion, but what part of Christianity would remain if God was not eternal?

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