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The Timeless God in Time

By JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

1. GOD'S TIMELESSNESS

God is the Eternal Timeless One. That is not simply a truism, or self-evident truth, but a doctrine positively taught in Holy Scripture. Because perverted man is definitely prone to design gods after his own imperfect, circumscribed image, in stupidly literal anthropomorphism and anthropopathism often ascribing to the infinite God finite forms and other human limitations, the Holy Scriptures with great emphasis assert again and again that the living God, the Creator of all things and the Redeemer of fallen mankind, is absolutely timeless.

Scripture ascribes to God *eternity*. That term, however, as applied to institutions pertaining to man, may mean merely "long time," as in Ex. 12:24, where the Israelites were commanded to observe the Passover "for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons forever (*olam*)." Again, the word may mean what has been called *sempiternity*, a term denoting something that has a beginning, but no end. The good and evil spirits in this sense are "eternal," for they have a beginning as creatures of God but no end (Luke 20:36; Matt. 25:41). This is true also of the human souls and of the human bodies reunited with the souls on the day of the resurrection (Matt. 25:34, 46). When this term *eternity* is thus applied to creatures, it is used in a special, restrictive sense which Holy Scripture is careful never to ascribe to God.

Applied to God, the term *eternity* denotes, in the first place, that God is *without beginning and without end*. He is God "from everlasting to everlasting" (Ps. 90:2). His "years shall have no end" (Ps. 102:27). He is "before the ages" (1 Cor. 2:7). He is the "King of the ages" (1 Tim. 1:17). He "only hath immortality" (1 Tim. 6:16). These are only a few of the many passages in which the Bible declares God to be the absolutely uncreated and imperishable Divine Being. He is, and always has been and always will be, the Everlasting One.

Again, as applied to God, the term *eternity* denotes the *absolute freedom of God from all succession of time*. Suc-

cession of time belongs, as a limitation, to all things finite; but God is the absolutely Infinite. As there is no time to which God is bound, so also He is not subject to any succession of time. What the *Quicumque* applies to the three Persons in the Godhead, applies also to the Godhead as such, so that we may say, with a somewhat different application: *In Deo est nihil prius aut posterius* (in God there is no before or after).¹ Augustine rightly says: *Fuisse et futurum esse non est in ea (scil. essentia divina), sed esse solum, quoniam aeterna est; nam fuisse et futurum esse non est aeternum.*² Thomas Aquinas well puts the thought thus: *Aeternitas est tota simul.*³ It has been said that the affirmation of God's absolute freedom from succession of time involves also His absolute freedom from all succession in the divine consciousness.⁴ That it does, for as there is in God no succession of time, so also there is in Him no succession of divine consciousness. God's thinking is never linear, but always punctiliar; that is to say, it does not succeed from point to point, but it is always an absolutely timeless present point. In other words, the axiom *Homo adspicit, Deus perspicit* may be applied also in the sense that God's consciousness, no matter in what form it may exercise itself, is always the absolutely timeless present "now." There is thus no time in God, no sequence of time, no end of time. God is the everlasting "I am" (Ex. 3:14). He is "the First, and He is the Last" (Is. 44:6). If the thought of God's absolute freedom from succession of time should trouble us, let us remember that God is the "totally Other," so utterly removed from man's thinking that, while man may through God's self-revelation conceive of God's existence, he can never understand God, as He exists absolutely or in Himself, exalted above space and time. God dwells "in the light which no man can approach unto" (1 Tim. 6:16). We cannot even predicate eternity of God if by that term we mean a certain *prius* in God upon which follows a certain *posterius* in Him, for God is absolutely exalted above all succession of thinking and being. He forever remains the absolute "Is." If God is said to have existed or have done anything "before the foundation

¹ Triglot Concordia, p. 32.

² Confessiones, IX; X, 24. Cf. Hodge, *Syst. Theol.*, Vol. I, p. 386.

³ Summa, I. X. 4 (*ibid.*).

⁴ Cf. Hodge, *Syst. Theol.*, I, 386 ff.

of the world" (Eph. 1:4), that is said from the viewpoint of man and not from that of God's absolute being.

In the third place, eternity, predicated of God, contains in itself the very cause of time.⁵ Strong rightly says: "Eternity is infinity in its relation to time."⁶ By the term *eternity*, in this sense, we negate the concept of time in God; but by it we also posit the concept of time in things outside God. Finite, as we human beings are, we mean to say by speaking of God as the Eternal that He is supremely exalted above all limitations of time to which we are subject. By it, however, we also wish to assert that the timeless Divine Being created out of His timeless consciousness the relations of time and space by which we finite creatures exist in a universe that is finite. Timelessness and time are paradoxical relations, but they are also correlatives. The latter follows from the former, for time after all is only a bit of timelessness with a fence around it. As we place little children into play pens, so that they may not stroll away into insecurity, so God has placed us in this life, into the play pen of time and space, in order that we might exist in security within safe limitations necessary for us as finite beings. The very time, therefore, with which God has made the world (as Augustine says) is a blessing bestowed upon us by God, our Creator and Protector, just as the whole world as such was meant by God to be a blessing for man.⁷

Eternity, in its proper sense, thus denotes God's absolute freedom from all limitations of time, or His absolute timelessness. Holy Scripture declares this timelessness in God when it says: "A thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past" (Ps. 90:4). When yesterday is past, it has become absolutely timeless, existing no more. The same thought is expressed also by the other illustration used in the verse, namely, that a thousand years in God's sight are as "a watch in the night." If before God a thousand years are as a mere night watch of three or four hours, then time, as it confronts us in this finite world, does not at all confront God in the realm of the infinite. The same truth is taught in 2 Pet.

⁵ Cf. Strong, *Syst. Theol.*, I, 275.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁷ Augustine: "*Mundus non in tempore, sed cum tempore factus est*" (cf. Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 276).

3:8, where the Apostle instructs his readers over against the atheists who denied the Lord's second coming on the ground that He (apparently) was delaying His Judgment and, therefore, not fulfilling the promise of His coming, with the thought: "One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." In other words, God does not reckon with years and days as we do, since He is essentially timeless.

Now, the attribute of eternity, in the sense of absolute timelessness, is fundamental for our conceiving of God as being altogether exalted above the limitations to which we are subject. If God is absolutely timeless, just as also He is absolutely spaceless, then He is essentially different from finite, time-bound, space-enclosed man. And so we must know God in order that in our thinking we may not draw Him down to the level of our own circumscribed, finite existence and so humanize Him; in other words, in order that we may not anthropomorphize or anthropopathize the totally other God. If we do that, then God for us is no longer God, but a man, though perhaps a superman; and we can no longer worship Him in spirit and in truth, for then there is no longer any difference in kind between God and man, but merely one in degree. Then God is only a bigger man than we are, but not God.

For this reason it was necessary for Holy Scripture to reveal God to us, in the first place, as supremely exalted above all limitations of time and space; or, as He is in Himself, absolute and sovereign and separated from His creation, or more simply, as Luther has well said, *in nuda maiestate*, in His unveiled majesty. We have, therefore, in Holy Scripture a large number of passages describing God just in that way. In fact, the entire class of negative or absolute or immanent attributes has been revealed to us primarily in order that we may know that God is God, and not a man, there being an unbridgeable gulf fixed between the infinite God and finite man. This simple lesson in the ABC of Christian theology we must bear in mind if we are to understand God rightly.

But, now, the attribute of eternity, in its sense of absolute timelessness, is, relatively speaking, academic or theoretical. What we mean to say by this is that God's timelessness does not trouble us very much as we consider Him in our relation to us as our Savior. Even the act of the in-

carnation, in which the Son of God assumed into His divine Person our human nature, does not seriously perplex us in a practical way, though here the problem arises whether or not the essence of God was increased by the permanent assumption of human nature into the Person of the Son of God. We, however, brush this problem aside with a just reference to God's immutability. So also the problem of creation does not seriously worry us in a practical way, since we know that creation was not a divine act in God, but one outside God. The universe came into being as a creation of God, not by any unfolding or emanation of God in a pantheistic sense, but by creation. The problem, however, becomes really serious when we study those attributes in which we view God as our Father, or in His relation to us as our Savior, or when we attend to our duty of preaching the *plus quam contradictoria* of Law and Gospel: the *Deus damnans* and the *Deus iustificans*. Here are paradoxes that deeply concern us because they are apt to engender in us doubt concerning God's ability to be our Redeemer and thus may weaken our faith in God as our Savior or our faith in His Word as the divine truth; for here apparently we meet with antitheses in the saving God which from the point of view of our salvation seemingly are utterly irreconcilable.

Take, for example, the attribute of God's immutability. Dr. A. L. Graebner, in his *Outlines of Doctrinal Theology*, gives this definition of God as the immutable Divine Being: "God is immutable, inasmuch as in His essence and attributes there never has been, nor ever will be, nor ever can be, any increase or decrease, any development or evolution, any improvement or deterioration, or any change of whatever kind."⁸ It is perhaps the last phrase, "or any change of whatever kind," that troubles the perplexed Christian most. If there cannot be in God any change of whatever kind, then God (humanly speaking) cannot be provoked by any sin which man may commit; then He cannot be reconciled by the vicarious atonement of Christ; then He cannot be influenced by the prayers of His children; in short, then God cannot see anything, hear anything, do anything, and be anything so far as human reason can judge. Then God cannot be Love. Then God cannot be just. Then there can be no Law and no Gospel. In short,

⁸ *Theology Proper*. Par. 30.

then God is altogether beyond our reach of comprehension and adoration. Then God is the utterly Unknowable.

And yet Holy Scripture describes God as the unchangeable Divine Being. "I am the Lord, I change not" (Mal. 3:6). "With whom is no variableness neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). "The Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent; for He is not a man that He should repent" (1 Sam. 15:29). This truth of God's immutability we must know in order that we may not anthropomorphize and anthropopathize the Eternal One. God, in Himself, exalted above space and time, considered in *nuda maiestate*, as the Absolute Being, apart from His relation to creatures, cannot be made angry by sin; cannot be moved by prayer; cannot be reconciled by any vicarious death. Otherwise God would be no longer the supreme, sovereign Lord, but He would be finite, influenced by causes outside Him. The axiom of the Christian Church: *In Deo non sunt causae formaliter causantes* (in God there are no causes actually moving Him) is both Scriptural and necessary for our true evaluation of God as God. The absolute God is moved only by Himself, not by anything outside Him, otherwise he would not be the absolute, sovereign God. To this truth we must hold.

Another attribute of God that is apt to trouble Christians is that of His simplicity. Divine simplicity has been defined as "the divine attribute according to which God is truly and really uncompounded," that is, "not compounded of matter and form, of integral parts, of substance and accident, of nature and subsistence."⁹ Hollaz gives this definition of the attribute of divine simplicity: "God is said to be one, not in kind, but in number, since He is a being entirely alone, not only in Himself undivided, but also indivisible because of the entire simplicity of the divine essence, as there is no composition in God."¹⁰ That means that God has no body or soul, no essence or accidents in the sense that we possess them, but that He is the absolutely Simple One (*Ens Simplex*). God is the absolute "I Am" (Ex. 3:14), the "*Lauter Ist*," that is, the "Pure Being," as Luther puts it, or "Pure Spirit" (spirit is God, John 4:24). We may put down these words on paper

⁹ Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 163 f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

or utter them with our lips, but really they convey to us no intelligible meaning, as we finite and complex human beings have no conception whatever of absolute simplicity or pure spirituality. The Church confesses: *In Deum non cadunt accidentia*, that is, there are no accidents or attributes in God, as there are attributes in human beings. In God all attributes, such as love, justice, goodness, power, and the like, are His very essence. God is essentially Love, as St. John says: "God is Love" (1 John 4:16). We may test the truth of this confession of the Church by assuming the unthinkable eventuality that God would lose His love, that He would cease to be just, that His power would fail Him, that His purposes would be hindered by any power outside Himself, and so forth. In that case God no longer would be God. A man may be loveless, unjust, unholy, and, for all that, altogether imperfect and indecent in every way, and yet he would still be a man. Nero was still a human being, though he burned living Christians to death. But a cruel, unrighteous God would no longer be God, since in that case He could be limited, imperfect, and subject to finiteness as man is. Calov rightly says: "In God the essence and attributes differ not really, but according to our way of thinking (*nostro concipiendi modo*); however, they are distinguished from the divine essence and among themselves because of the imperfection of our comprehension."¹¹ Here again we face a problem which the human intellect, corrupted by sin, cannot grasp or solve. The absolute simplicity of God passes our understanding, just as does the peace of God and, for all that, whatever God is and does.

We might continue this Scriptural description of God as the absolute Sovereign Being, exalted above space and time, *ad infinitum*. God's immensity, His omnipresence, His decrees and eternal purposes, His operations in nature and grace, all bear witness to a Divine Being that is not finite, but infinite; not subject to time, but above time; not influenced by forces outside Himself, but influencing and ruling all things to His sovereign glory. As said before, this Scriptural fact must be emphasized, in order that we may not humanize or "democratize" God, as have done the rationalists of all ages. Christians adore the absolute, infinite God, who in Scripture has re-

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 161.

vealed Himself in His supreme glory and majesty as the "totally Other," telling us in so many words: "God is not a man" (1 Sam. 15:29), that is, the Absolute is not relative, or the Infinite is not finite.

2. THE TIMELESS GOD IN TIME

Leaving the subject of the timeless God as He exists absolutely in Himself, supremely exalted above space and time, we shall now consider another class of Scripture passages which definitely tell us that God has entered into time and therefore must be regarded by us from our own viewpoint as within time and space.

This suggests the problem why God created the relations of time and space and all things which are within time and space. We cannot solve that ultimate problem by our finite, limited reason, but are thrown back upon faith in the Scripture revelation that it was God's wisdom, goodness, and mercy that prompted Him to call into being this finite universe (Ps. 104:24; Prov. 3:19; etc.).

The divine motive of goodness and mercy explains to us also why God has revealed Himself to us as being in time and space, which is the only way creatures, circumscribed by time and space, can conceive of Him. God evidently did not only desire creatures, but He also wanted to be known, loved, and adored by His rational creatures. Therefore He describes Himself to us in terms of time and space

That does not mean that God Himself is now actually subject to time and space and whatever relations are comprehended in them, for He forever remains the infinite, supramundane God. But God, as St. Augustine says, condescends to us in order that we may rise together up to Him.¹² God thus speaks to us as having an essence and attributes, just as human beings have an essence (personality) and attributes. Again, He speaks to us as if in Him the attributes are inherent in His essence. From this point of view we must say that the attributes of God, as revealed in Scripture, have objective existence. We dare not say with Scotus Erigena: *Deus nescit se quid sit, quia non est quid*.¹³ But we must regard the divine attributes as really existent. In other words,

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 162.

¹³ Strong, *Syst. Theol.*, p. 244.

God is holy, righteous, loving, merciful, gracious, and the like. From this point of view, God is not absolute Simplicity in the sense that there is in Him no distinction of qualities or powers. That would in the end leave us with a pantheistic divine being, devoid of personality.¹⁴

Nor dare we deny one attribute of God because another attribute of His seems to contradict the first. We, for example, dare not deny the everlasting wrath of God on the ground that Scripture teaches us that the just and holy God is also a loving God. Both are true: God is perfect holiness, and He is also perfect love; He is the *Deus damnans* and the *Deus iustificans*. God's perfect righteousness, of course, does not really contradict His perfect love, for His punitive righteousness and His forgiving love are predicated of Him in two different relations. In a way, as Luther says, the Law and the Gospel are *plus quam contradictoria*, more than contradictory, but, again, they agree wonderfully when we consider the sphere, purpose, and relation of each. The Law pertains to the impenitent; the Gospel, to the penitent. So also God is *damnans* inasmuch as we are sinners. He is *iustificans* inasmuch as by faith we are in Christ. In short, we find God in Scripture thinking and acting just as does a human father who spans his wayward son, while also he mercifully receives the weeping penitent. In other words, God is mutable.

We have therefore in Holy Scripture a wholly intelligible God, while we have in Scripture also a wholly unintelligible God. He is understandable inasmuch as in Scripture He accommodates Himself to our categories of thought, revealing Himself as if He were within space and time. He is unintelligible to us inasmuch as in Scripture He reveals Himself in His absolute majesty, exalted above space and time. While there are no causes outside God which *actually* move God, there are causes which move Him *virtually* or *according to our mode of thinking*. *In Deo sunt causae virtualiter causantes*, as our church teachers have said.

Our dogmaticians endeavor to render the thought clear by saying that in one case God's essence is considered "in the first act" (*essentia Dei in actu primo considerata*). In other words, Scripture first reveals to us the timeless God in His

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

absolute sovereignty, and, again, it reveals to us the God of love as He condescends to our finite understanding and thus appears to us as being and acting within time and space.

There are two questions that arise in our minds as we study this somewhat academic distinction. The first is: Is there any Scripture proof for this distinction, or is it merely a theological heritage from medieval scholasticism? The answer, we believe, is given to us in 1 Cor. 13: 9-12, where St. Paul writes: "We prophesy in part." That means, in the first place, that our *theologia viae*, or our theology as we have it revealed to us for this earthly life, is partial and incomplete. We do not know *everything* that can be known of God and divine things. But, in the second place, it means also that God has revealed Himself to us in part, or as Luther puts it "*stueckweise*," "piecemeal," that is, as the Divine Being made up of this attribute and that, of righteousness and love, of wrath and forgiveness, of condemnation and salvation, and the like. We thus know God in this present life only partially and inadequately, though savingly. We do not as yet see Him as He is in His perfect Godhead; we do not as yet know Him as now we are known of Him. That will take place only when the perfect is come.

In the revealing passage just referred to, the Apostle, however, suggests another important point to help us estimate our present imperfect theology. He says: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." In his holy Word, God, as it were, now stammers to us of things unintelligible to us as loving parents stammer to their little children of things which as yet surpass their comprehension. A father would be stupid to try to expound to his two-year-old boy the intricacies of a modern locomotive. As the swift, powerful locomotive passes by, he simply tells his son: "There goes the *choo-choo!*" This the child comprehends, and as often as he sees a train go by, he cries out: "Choo-choo!" Later, to his surprise, he will discover that the simple "choo-choo" of his childhood days is a highly complex and difficult mechanism which amazes him yet more as an adult than it did as a child, when he thought of it in terms of a simple "choo-choo." So, too, in our present theology, we now speak, understand, and think of God as children speak,

understand, and think of things that lie beyond their comprehension. Someday, so the Apostle consoles us, that which is perfect will come, and then that which is in part will be done away. In the meanwhile we believe in God as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word, until the day comes when we shall see Him face to face.

This, however, raises the second question: If we thus speak of God in part and imperfectly, as Scripture speaks of Him in part and imperfectly, do we gain a true and correct conception of God? It goes without saying, of course, that while we acknowledge God as He is in His absolute majesty, exalted above space and time, we usually and above all preach Him as Holy Scripture itself commonly speaks of Him, namely, as He has revealed Himself to us — as being within time and space, possessing all the limitations (except sin) which men possess who are in space and time. We thus make Him known, above all, as the righteous and holy God, who punishes sin here in time and hereafter in eternity; and we make Him known also as the merciful God, who in Christ Jesus forgives us all our sins and by grace receives us as His dear children for the sake of our Redeemer. In other words, we preach the Law and the Gospel, as God has revealed the Law and the Gospel to us in His Word; and in doing this, we leave out of consideration entirely God's absolute existence above time and space. That subject concerns us only in case we deal with persons who wrongly anthropomorphize and anthropopathize God. It does not concern us when we deal with people who are willing to accept the divine Word as it reads.

We thus convey to those to whom we proclaim the divine Word an essentially true conception of God, though it is inadequate, since it is limited to our life of time and space. When we shall arrive in heaven, where that which is perfect is come, then we shall not have to correct our doctrines concerning the Holy Trinity, or the Personal Union, or the Real Presence, and so forth, but we shall know these mysteries in their complete fullness of perfection, just as we shall then see God face to face and know Him as He is. The adult engineer who is managing His powerful modern locomotive may smile at the simple name of "choo-choo" by which he once designated this highly complex piece of machinery, but essentially it was a "choo-choo"; and despite his better knowledge

of the locomotive, he will still speak of it to his own two-year-old lad in terms of a "choo-choo." Just so we stammer of God in this simple childlike existence of time and space.

We do so in other relations. We speak of heaven as a place, though we know that when the timeless and spaceless will have come, there will be no more "place," as space exists for us now. Nevertheless, in heaven there will be something that will correspond to Christ's precious promise: "In my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2). These words are certainly true despite the fact that in heaven there will be no earthly mansions, as we know them now. What there will be will certainly be more glorious than the most splendid palaces of this world. Our dogmatists therefore caution students of theology to understand the expressions in which God accommodates Himself to our mode of thinking, *θεοπεπῶς*, that is, in a God-becoming manner, or in a manner worthy of God.

Doctrinal theology is often regarded as pre-eminently academical, but though its categories are essentially theoretical, its applications are wondrously practical. What a treasure of devotional values does not lie in the theological dogma that God has revealed Himself to us in His Word both as beyond time and as within time, as the sovereign Lord of all and also as the gracious Father, who is merciful to us in Christ Jesus, His Son, our Savior. God's infinite care for us is revealed to us not only in our creation and preservation, not only in the incarnation of His Son and our redemption, but also in the gracious way in which the essentially unknowable God has made Himself known to us in His divine Word. Luther therefore well speaks of God as having become incarnate in Holy Scripture, for there He took upon Himself the flesh and blood of our thinking and speaking. We there see Him in our own form as a man and hear His voice as that of the true Friend of sinners whom we are to know and love and adore.

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