Critique of Wayne Grudem's Explanation of Divine Eternity in His *Systematic Theology*

Wayne Grudem is a prominent theologian and author who earned a PhD from the University of Cambridge and serves as a research professor of theology and biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary. His volume on Systematic Theology continues to be used as a primary textbook for seminary coursework and is a true gift to the body of gift.

Grudem makes a persuasive case for divine eternity from what I consider the majority evangelical and Reformed perspective. His case is both intellectually stimulating and biblically faithful.

Although there is much to like about Grudem's work, many issues accompany it. Let's begin where one ought to—definitions. He defines divine eternity as

> "*God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in his own being, and he sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time, and he acts in time*" (pg. 199).

First Critique.

It is a wonder why he did not stop after the first five words. To be eternal is to exist permanently without beginning or end. I argue that anything beyond this is to advocate *a particular view of divine eternity, not to define divine eternity*. I appreciated lengthy, detailed definitions, but in this case, they are unnecessary, to say the least. The idea I presented is the most fundamental biblical point about Scripture's portrayal of God's relationship to time. God is eternal. No passage manifests this point greater than Psalm 90:2: "from everlasting to everlasting you are God." God cannot fail to exist or end, nor did he ever begin. His existence is permanent. No Christian disputes it, and all orthodox theologians agree that it's the biblical teaching.

Why do I insist on a minimalistic definition of divine eternity? For three reasons: (1) the biblical data is itself minimalistic and is therefore (2) indeterminate to explicate particular views of God's relationship to time, and (3) time is so inherently philosophical that it requires warrant outside of Scripture for particularistic definitions, which goes beyond the field of systematic theology. As soon as philosophy becomes too involved, we are no longer dealing with systematic theology but philosophical theology. So this is my first charge against Grudem's definition: *it goes beyond the bounds of systematic theology and delves into philosophical theology*.

It endorses far too much philosophically to be considered a truly *systematic* formulation of the biblical data. When I say his definition is too philosophical, what I mean is that the nature of time, and theories and views of time, seem to be presupposed by his own definition. For example, "succession of moments" seems to imply a tensed theory of time. However, his statement that God "sees all time equally vividly" suggests a static conception of time, in which all events in time always exist. Also, he uses anthropomorphic language to refer to God "seeing" events in time and time itself, which is quite ambiguous. Using unambiguous language appears to me to be an attribute of an effective definition.

He concludes with a more reasonable addition to his definition by affirming that God "acts in time." It seems evident from Scripture that God does perform actions in time. Although it is not without philosophical questions, such as: what is time? are his actions within time merely relative to a human perspective? if God is timeless, how can he act in time? Additionally, I question to what extent, if at all, this point is necessary to add to a biblical doctrine of divine eternity. We can construct a more minimalist, biblically grounded definition from Grudem's original by removing its philosophical and ambiguous language: *the doctrine of divine eternity is that God is eternal, with no beginning or end.* This covers all of the biblical data that Grudem discusses in his section.

Second Critique.

Grudem connects his case for divine eternity with the attributes of immutability and infinity. He says, "To be infinite is to be unlimited, and this doctrine teaches that time does not limit God" (pg. 199). Right, in his nature, there can be no ontological competition or superiority of time over God. He is sovereign even over time. *But let me critique this connection by asking, what if God chose to limit himself by time in some respect*? For the sake of argument, let's presuppose that being in time is a limiting attribute (which it may not truly be a limitation), but God chose to become subject to time? William Lane Craig famously defends a view that God is timeless sans creation and temporal from the moment of creation. If temporality is a negative quality, then God, on Craig's view, chose to limit himself. Notice, according to Craig's view, God is not essentially temporal; that is, it is not part of his nature, but rather was a consequence of his will. Is Grudem utterly opposed to such a scenario by virtue of seeing temporality as a limitation? We have clearly seen God limit himself in the incarnation, so why could he not theoretically do so with respect to time? It seems Grudem's statement requires the caveat that God is not limited by time essentially or by his nature. Proponents of views that God is omnitemporal would need to show, in this case, that temporality is not a negative attribute—or, put differently, that timelessness is not a great-making property.

Continuation of the Second Critique.

Grudem argues that time has no effect on God or evokes no sense of change in God. He goes further by saying that, therefore, God's knowledge does not change: "God never learns new things or forgets things, for that would mean a change in his perfect knowledge. This also implies that the passing of time does not add to or detract from God's knowledge. He knows all things past, present, and future and knows them all equally vividly" (pg. 199). Grudem affirms a past, present, and a future, so I would reckon he would concur with a tensed theory of time. However, if time is tensed, which means that there is an objective "now," then wouldn't God's knowledge change in the sense that his knowledge of the present, or which moment is "now," is constantly changing? God would learn a new thing, namely, that the moment which we are experiencing is occurring "now." If God does not incur a change of knowledge as to which moment is now the present one, that would imply either that there is no objective present or that

God is “present” at all moments. The former is impossible on a tensed theory of time, while the latter seems to assume divine timelessness, which requires its own set of argumentation. As a single proposition in critique of Grudem’s statement, *affirming an objective present (presentism) would seem logically to imply that God gains the knowledge of which moment of time is “now” the “present” moment.*

Relevant thus far has been Grudem’s employment of simplicity and consistency. His definition lacks simplicity, and his connection to the divine attributes of unchangeability and infinity, as well as his omniscience by default, raises questions of consistency.

Third Critique.

It is difficult to know precisely what “succession of moments in his own being” means. Clearly, what Grudem means is timelessness (pg. 199). Perhaps this is a clever attempt to veil his view within his definition itself. What does it mean to speak of temporal succession in one's being? As temporal beings, we experience a succession of moments, but is it part of our nature? Perhaps it is, in which case by definition we experience a succession of moments—because our nature is temporal. But to say God does not, in his nature, experience a succession of moments is simply to say that he is essentially atemporal or timeless. Now we see the hiddenness of Grudem’s definition, *my third critique: he merely presupposes divine timelessness.*

I find this to be a fundamental mistake that theologians often make. Timelessness is far from the only view of God’s relationship to time, and nowhere does Scripture imply it. Scripture is not a philosophical textbook. We don’t get to read philosophical theories into the text. I fear that is what many theologians, knowingly or unknowingly, do when they synthesize the biblical data and arrive at their view of divine timelessness. The biblical doctrine of divine eternity—a systematic formulation of the relevant biblical data concerning God’s relationship to time—does not include particular views of God’s relationship to time such as timelessness, relative timelessness, omnitemporality, or some overlapping view. Perhaps it is not the case that a succession of moments occurs in one's being; in that case, Grudem should remove it from his definition. What incurs a succession of moments, persons or natures? I would argue that persons experience time, not natures. Although temporality or atemporality could be entailed by the nature of a thing. You say, “all objects I can think of have an essence of either.” Well, what about time itself? Is it essentially temporal or atemporal? That would be absurd. So this idea of temporal succession tied to the very nature of a thing should be expounded in a philosophical theology textbook, for instance, not in a summary of the biblical data. In conclusion, none of the biblical passages Grudem provides to support his presupposition of timelessness imply it.

Fourth Critique.

Now we come to Grudem’s statement that “God created time” (pg. 199). This is not in itself an erroneous statement; many theologians have and do believe that God created time. But one of the problems with a statement like this one—despite my continued insistence that it should be

cautioned in a systematic theology—is that *he never clearly defines what that thing is that he calls "time," which God supposedly created*. It becomes clear what Grudem is probably trying to indicate: that is, physical time. He describes physical time roughly when he states that "The study of physics tells us that matter and time and space must all occur together: if there is no matter, there can be no space or time either" (pg. 200). First of all, it seems a bit generic to claim that "this is what physics says." Physicists have claimed several things related to space-time, so I'm not sure how much argumentative weight is given to such a statement. Regardless, he is trying to describe the measurement of time relative to physical events. Our clocks, for example, provide a measure of time. But there is another type of time that philosophers distinguish, called metaphysical time. This would in essence describe meta-time, or time itself, apart from any space or matter. Grudem most likely lacks this distinction because of his work being systematic rather than philosophical, which underscores my key criticism. Particular views of God's relationship to time wind up entering the philosophy of time. Strictly speaking, in terms of physical time, yes, Grudem correctly identifies God as its author and creator.

William Lane Craig rightly calls out the inconsistencies in Grudem's version of divine eternity in the sense that he speaks of "before time":

> "Before there was a universe, and *before there was time*, *God always existed*, without beginning, and without being influence by time. And time, therefore, does not have existence in itself, but, like the rest of creation, depends on God's external being and power to keep it existing" (pg. 200).

Fifth Critique.

First, let's deal with the problems with Grudem's view, and then interact with his response to Craig's critique. In ordinary language, it is not uncommon to find statements about "before the universe" or "before time" without second-guessing them. Laymen usually don't grasp the philosophical implications that follow. The problem is that in a systematic theology, there is no warrant for a lack of philosophical care, especially one that raises plenty of philosophically objectionable inquiries. To speak of "before an event" is to employ temporal terms and implies temporal ordering, which is a logical contradiction of terms. If the universe marks the beginning of time, as Grudem claims, then how can he speak of "before" there is time? That is to employ temporal language and imply temporal ordering to a state of affairs where, according to Grudem, supposedly there is no time. He clearly contradicts himself by saying that "Before God created the world, there was no passage of time, but God timelessly existed" (pg. 202). To speak of temporal things in a state of affairs without the existence of time is nonsensical. This is why it is helpful to distinguish between physical time and metaphysical time—because it is not incoherent to mention a state of affairs before physical time if there is such a thing as metaphysical time, but nowhere in his case does Grudem add this point. Without this distinction, Grudem is obviously contradicting himself.

Additionally, where does Grudem provide evidence that God is never *influenced* by time? What is meant by influence? If he means change, limitation, or succession of moments in being, I have already addressed those points. If he means that God cannot *experience* time, then he would be proposing some strong view of divine timelessness, which, as I've shown, contradicts some of his other statements: as he states within a footnote, "God sees events *in time* and acts *in time*" (pg. 201). I'm not arguing that Grudem is always "wrong" in the areas I critique. Rather, I am showing the entailment of "philosophical sloppiness" by his employment of "philosophically loaded" terms and propositions without expounding upon and defending them. Even the final aspect of the quote above, that God's power keeps time existing in itself. This seems to imply an ongoing or continuation—that is, a succession of moments—of God's sustaining time. Well, if God is timeless and not influenced by time, as Grudem supposes, then how does God "continue to" sustain, as in a temporal succession of events? Again, if a metaphysical time is posited, a statement like that would seem to be more consistent.

Grudem acknowledges and summarizes this critique with the following:

> "[Craig] has objected that it is contradictory to talk about God existing 'before time began,' because the word 'before' implies that one event happens after another, and therefore the word 'before' is inconsistent with a state of timelessness" (pg. 200).

To clarify, this fifth critique is not that Grudem is wrong for positing divine timelessness—although I have argued that it should be left out of a biblical doctrine of divine eternity—but rather that temporal language must be consistent with the view one is positing. In this case, using temporal terms to explain God's timelessness in relation to creation is inconsistent.

One could argue in response that the criticisms of Grudem's case for divine eternity are a product of finite human language and that this is the real issue, not how Grudem uses terms. Admittedly, language cannot only provide so much when a topic like the philosophy of time is discussed. In this particular example, however, there is no reason Grudem "must" use those terms. He could speak of God existing timelessly "without" creation or time, rather than "before time." Of course, he would still need to defend why that view is correct, but that is not the primary concern of this critique. The difficulties in describing time coherently within the restriction of human language are all the more reason why any sloppiness or inconsistencies should be avoided at all costs. We ought to be careful and intentional in our use of terminology when speaking about God's relationship to time.

Grudem's Response to the Fifth Critique.

He responds to Craig by saying that "the Bible itself uses this kind of language to tell us things that were true of God 'before' creation and even before time" (pg. 200). He offers the following biblical texts: Jude 25, 2 Timothy 1:9, and Titus 1:2. The two latter passages consist of *πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων*, which has been variously translated as "before all eternity," or "before the ages began," or "before the beginning of time," although *αἰωνίων* is more closely related to "without

beginning or end," rather than denoting time itself. Regardless, let's grant his translation. Grudem knows better than I that hermeneutics entails more than translating. What the text appears to "say" is not necessarily what the author intended to "teach." Many examples can be given to support this (e.g., Mark 4:31, where Jesus says that a mustard seed is the smallest seed). Context shows that Jude is elevating the majesty and glory of God to give God his proper worship, honor, and praise among ungodly sinners. Jude is not teaching the philosophy of time nor God's relationship to time. Timothy and Titus both refer to the promise of eternal life given to God's children; the same can be said of Jude. None of these texts teaches timelessness, nor do they make philosophical statements about time itself. As a side note, neither the Greeks nor the Jews had the contemporary understanding of the philosophy of time that we do today. Treating their statements in a modern academic context is anachronistic.

The kind of language Grudem uses can indeed be found in select places in Scripture; however, Grudem's error is in thinking that he is therefore free to use it within his systematic context, where he is explaining a very different topic than what Scripture is teaching. Using the exact words does not mean the same thing is being implied or taught. He must argue exegetically that the biblical authors intend to make philosophical statements about God's relationship to time and to time itself. Otherwise, it is inappropriate (in fact, I would argue it is a form of equivocation) to use a biblical expression for the purpose of defending a systematic formulation when the context of the biblical expression does not directly teach it.

Grudem digs the hole deeper by offering an additional rationale for his use of "before time":

> "In fact, while it is possible for us to think of the idea of time beginning and then going forward forever, the idea of time extending infinitely far into the past seems impossible—for if past time is infinite, then it would be impossible to ever reach the present moment" (pg. 201).

Craig (and I) would agree with the truthfulness of this point, but how does this reinforce the consistency of employing temporal terms for a state of affairs without time? If anything, this proves the validity of the critique—because referring temporally to a "before time" requires some additional explanation of how this "time before time" either began or extends infinitely into the past. We agree that time infinitely extending into the past is highly problematic and should be avoided. But that applies equally to references to "before time," which is precisely what we're emphasizing to Grudem. It seems Grudem is attempting to ignore the implications of his terminology and view.

He concludes in this section that

> "The foregoing Scripture passages and the fact that God always existed before there was any time combine to indicate to us that God's own being does not have a succession of moments or any progress from one state of existence to another. To God himself, all of his existence is always somehow 'present,' though admittedly that idea is difficult for us

> to understand, for it is a kind of existence different from that which we experience" (pg. 201).

To be blunt, I don't see how Grudem arrives at his conclusion, and I find it difficult for anyone without a predisposition towards divine timelessness to reach it from the biblical data at hand.

Sixth Critique.

Here, I move beyond a specific critique of terminology or definitions to the incoherence of his view of time. Grudem affirms divine timelessness (see pp. 199, 202). He continues to "hide" this in his claim that "God's own being does not have a succession of moments" (pg. 201). Contrariwise, Grudem appeals to Psalm 90:4 as an illustration of God's "seeing" past events:

> "When the text says that a thousand years are 'as *yesterday* when it is past,' it still indicates that God sees past events in human history as past events, not as events that are presently happening… God still sees the past in human history as past" (pg. 201).

At least we can confirm that Grudem holds to a tensed theory of time, in which temporal becoming really occurs, the objective present, or "now," truly exists, and the past and future do not literally exist. The question, then, is how he can simultaneously affirm divine timelessness. If God has no succession of moments and is not literally within time, and therefore timeless, then how does he know when the objective present, past, and future are? This is the age-old question for advocates of timelessness. Their response is typically to adopt the tenseless theory of time, which holds that the past, present, and future are illusory. I will not offer a critique of the tenseless theory of time here. However, the question remains a fair one regarding Grudem's view. Putting the critique differently, his statement that "*all of the past* is viewed by God with great clarity and vividness": if God is timeless and not influenced by time, as Grudem himself stated, then how does he know when it is literally "the past?" Later, he makes his view on this matter unmistakable by explaining that Scripture demonstrates God's awareness of "the passage of time" (pg. 202). How does he know that the civil war is in the past, but the year 2055 is not? How can he differentiate past, present, and future, which objectively exist on a tensed theory of time? How can God know what is objectively past if he is atemporal?

Continuation of the Sixth Critique.

Just like the necessary defense of timelessness on a tensed theory of time, so Grudem must defend his view of God "seeing every event in time" and "acting in time" (pg. 202). I argue he has backed himself into a corner, as he seeks to affirm contradictory views of God in time and outside of time. To some extent, Grudem perhaps believes this as well, but only that Scripture has led him there. So his next step is to appeal to mystery: "once we have said that, we still must affirm that these verses speak of God's relationship to time in a way that we do not and cannot experience" (pg. 202). There will be a limit to what we can know about time, and an even greater mystery to what we can know about God, so putting the two together holds unthinkable knowledge. With that concession, that still does not make it plausible to posit a view with

internal contradictions. Grudem's view quite literally defeats itself. He ultimately wants to argue that God is both timeless and temporal, perhaps a "God transcends time" view, as seen in scholars such as John Frame (whom he doesn't directly quote but possibly references when he speaks of God as "Lord of time" on p. 204). He goes on to respond: "to admit that *we do not understand* how a timelessly eternal God can act in time does not prove that God *cannot* be timeless in his own being and still create time and act in time" (p. 203). Agreed, but that's not what makes his view implausible—the self-contradictions do. At best, Grudem summarizes his claims in stating that "I maintain that [God] is able *to act in time* in different ways while (in a way that we do not understand) remaining timeless in his own being" (p. 203). I argue that we ought to choose from views of God's relationship to time that are neither explicitly contradictory nor biblically inconsistent.

Seventh Critique.

Grudem tries to support his appeal to mystery by appealing to the incarnation. Somehow, when God took on human flesh, he became fully human and yet remained fully God. Although there has been much debate over the centuries about how to make sense of this phenomenon, we are ultimately left with the question of how Jesus was both fully God and fully man. At face value, I think this appeal to analogy holds merit. However, there is one key difference I argue against in Grudem's case: Scripture teaches the incarnation and the twin natures of Christ, but it does not explicitly or implicitly teach the dual temporality and atemporality of the triune God. That is, we can consider the divine and human natures of Christ with more grace for mystery because we know for certain that Scripture teaches it. However, as I have articulated, it is far from true that Scripture teaches divine timelessness. Therefore, it is somewhat disanalogous to compare the incarnation of Christ and divine eternity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue that all of these seven points provide a powerful critique of Grudem's case for divine eternity. While my criticism might seem extensive for a short section of his Systematic Theology, it emphasizes the issues that arise when systematicians and biblical scholars unintentionally conflate hermeneutics with philosophy. There is much to like about Grudem's section on the doctrine of God. He offers relevant biblical data and recognizes its authority for formulating doctrine. Laymen can benefit from his contributions. If nothing else, he argued a case for divine eternity that encouraged and facilitated critical interaction. For that I am grateful.

Wayne, Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020.