

ETERNITY: TIMELESSNESS OR ENDLESS TIME?

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WHAT IS ETERNITY??

There are two schools of thought on this topic:

- 1. Eternity is a timeless realm** without succession, duration, or sequence. There is no "before" or "after" in eternity. All past, present, and future is at an "Eternal Now".
- 2. Eternity is never ending time**, without beginning or end. It is forever time, time from everlasting to everlasting.

WHAT DID THE EARLY CHURCH BELIEVE?

POSITION ONE:

Augustine and those of his thought believed that eternity was a timeless realm. This was also the Philosophy of Plato and other heathen philosophers.

Eastern Cultist Philosopher Enneads of Plotinus :

"We know Eternity as a Life changelessly motionless ... not this now and now that other, but always all; not existing now in one mode and now in another, but a consummation without part or interval. All its content is in immediate concentration as at one point; nothing in it ever knows development; all remains identical within itself, knowing nothing of change... What future, in fact could bring to that Being anything which it does not now possess ... as it can never come to be anything at present outside it, so necessarily it cannot include any past; ... futurity, similarly is banned; nothing could be yet to come to it. ... one which never turns to any kind outside itself that has never received any accession that is now receiving none and never will receive any " (Third Ennead VII,4-5, p.120-121)

Augustine in "The City Of God" -

"... It is not as if the knowledge of God were of various kinds, knowing in different ways things which as yet are not, things which are and things which have been. For not in our fashion does He look forward to what is future, nor what is present, nor back upon what is past; but in a manner quite different and far and profoundly remote from our way of thinking. For He does not pass from this to that by transition of thought, but beholds all things with absolute unchangeableness; so that of those things which emerge in time, the

future indeed are not yet, and the present are now and the past no longer are; but all of these are by Him comprehended in his stable and eternal Presence. ... nor does His present knowledge differ from that which it ever was or shall be, for those variations of time, past, present ad future through they alter our knowledge, do not affect His... Neither is there any growth from thought to thought in the conceptions of Him in whose spiritual vision all things which He knows are at once embraced." (City of God XI Ch. 21 p.333)

Augustine in his "Confessions" -

"...in the Eternal nothing passeth, but the whole is present; whereas no time is all at once present: and that all time past, is driven on by time to come, and all to come followeth upon the past; and all past and to come, is created, and flows out of that which is ever present... see how eternity [is] ever still-standing, neither past nor to come." (Confessions Book XI p.262)

Augustine in a sermon -

"Eternity is stability, but in time variety; in Eternity all things stand still, in time one thing comes, another succeeds." (Nicen and Post-Nicean Fathers, Volume 6, Sermon LXVII, p.)

In other words, "eternity" according to this philosophical view is not time "forever and ever" but eternity is rather the absence of time, a stagnant stand-still without any succession, duration, chronology, or sequence; from which God looks upon and dwells in all of time - past, present, and future simultaneously. God is not "everlasting" in the sense of never ceasing duration, but God is at a "ever stand-still" in the sense of absent of the succession of duration, dwelling in the past, present, and future all at once.

POSITION TWO:

While Augustine and those after him believed eternity to be timelessness, the primitive Church before Augustine believed it to be everlasting time.

Oscar Cullmann -

"Eternity is understood in Primitive Christianity only as endlessly extended time. It should be added that the erroneous importations into Primitive Christian thinking of the Platonic contrast between time and timeless eternity has no connection with the few 'marginal passages' that mention the existence of God before the creation and after the end of the world. It connects rather the biblical distinction between the two ages, the 'present' and 'future' age."

Oscar Cullman, Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Concept of Time and History, 3rd ed. (New York: Gordon Press, 1977) pp. 65-66.

Nelson Pike -

Pike comments on the early Christian creeds: "Christ, begotten of the Father 'before the ages - aeons' (Nicene Creed, A.D. 381)... This phrase occurs in previous personal confessions - Lucian, Cyril, Eusebius, and Epiphanius; the Creed of Chalcedon and the Athanasian Creed. It appears to be a firm part of tradition.

"Why is it said that He was 'begotten before the worlds?'... 'That none should think there was ever a time when He was not. In other words, by this is expressed that Jesus is the Son of God from everlasting, even as God the Father is from everlasting.' (Larger Catechism of the Eastern Church)... The point seems to be that to 'exist before the ages' is to exist at all moments in time."

Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 180.

Justin Martyr said, "Some are sent to be punished **UNCEASINGLY** unto judgment and condemnation of fire." Eternal life and eternal condemnation, is not a "stand-still" (the word Augustine used for eternity) but eternal life and eternal condemnation is "unceasing" (the word Justin Martyr used) Again Justin said, "He goes to the **EVERLASTING** punishment". It is clear the Justin did not see "eternal" as "stand-still" but rather "eternal" as "everlasting". So eternal life or eternal condemnation was either everlasting life or everlasting condemnation. Likewise, when the bible says God is eternal, that means that God is everlasting. What Justin calls "**ETERNAL fire**" in one place he calls "punishment for **ENDLESS DURATION**" elsewhere. Justin used the words "everlasting", "unceasing" and "endless duration" synonymous with "eternal".

Theophilus spoke of "life everlasting" for the righteous. Not life at a "stand-still". And he spoke of "everlasting fire" for sinners, not "stand-still" existence.

Irenaeus spoke of "eternal fire" in contrast with "**LENGTH OF DAYS FOREVER AND EVER**". He also used the term "everlasting d**nation". So "eternal" to Irenaeus was the same as "everlasting" which was the same as "length of days forever and ever". He also spoke of eternity as "forever" which he described as "constant advancement". Elsewhere he described the "eternal" as "**WITHOUT END**" or "**NEVER-ENDING**".

Hermas used the term "**FOREVER**" to describe eternity.

Clement of Alexandria used the terminology of "everlasting contemplation". He also used the word "**ENDLESS**".

Tertullian used the terms "eternal" and "everlasting" synonymously (like the Greek does). He spoke of "eternity in **ENDLESS** fire".

Mark Minucius Felix spoke of eternity as having "neither limit nor **TERMINATION**".

Hippolytus said that "eternal" was "**WITHOUT END**".

Origen said that those who face "eternal fire" will "**PERPETUALLY** endure torture".

Commodianus said that those who receive eternal condemnation will suffer "**FOR ALL TIME**".

Cyprian said that "eternal" was "**PERPETUAL**". He also said, "**ETERNAL** punishments in the fires of Gehenna... an **EVER**-burning...Nor will there be any means by which **AT ANY TIME** they can have either rest or an **END**... **INFINITE** tortures." And elsewhere as "**NEVER-ENDING**" and "**IMMORTALITY**". According to Cyprian, eternity was not *without time* but eternity was *infinite time without end*

Archelaus described eternity as "everlasting" a place where activities "do not **CEASE**".

To the Early Church, what the bible meant by "eternal life" and "eternal death" was the same as "everlasting life" and "everlasting death". It is the same Greek word. Eternal simply meant "forever" or without end of time, not without time.

Eternity is simply, as Justin called it, "endless duration" or what Irenaeus called "never-ending" and "without end", or what Clement of Alexandria said was "endless". It was, as Commodianus said, "for all time" or what Cyprian called "perpetual".

(Quotes from the Early Church taken from "A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs" by David Bercot, p 242-250)

WHAT THE CHURCH HAS BELIEVED SINCE THE EARLY CHURCH

Others have conceived of eternity as everlasting time since the primitive Church.

John Locke -

I ask those who say they have a positive idea of eternity whether their idea of eternity includes succession or not... The notion they have of duration forces them to conceive that whatever has duration of a longer continuance today than it was yesterday... nothing [is] more inconceivable to me than duration without succession... But if our weak apprehensions cannot separation succession from any duration whatsoever, our idea of eternity can be nothing but an infinite succession, of moments of duration wherein anything does exist."

John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Peter H. Niddith, ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), Bk. II, p. 172

THE SONG AMAZING GRACE

I realized recently that the song "Amazing Grace" gives us a great picture of eternity:

"When we've been there **ten thousand years**, Bright shining as the sun, We've **no less days** to sing God's praise Than when we've first begun."

A WORD STUDY OF LANGUAGES

A HEBREW WORD STUDY

Isaiah talked of God as "the High and lofty One that inhabits eternity".

The Hebrew word is "ad" and it means "duration, in the sense of perpetuity". It means, "ever (-lasting, -more), old, perpetually, + world without end."

A GREEK WORD STUDY

The New Testament translated the word "aionios" as "eternal" in some places and "everlasting" in others.

The word "aionios" means:

1. Perpetual
2. Without beginning or end
3. Without beginning
4. Without end, never to cease, everlasting.

In the Greek, the New Testament word for eternal does not mean "without time" but rather means "without end".

And let it be remembered that the Early Church would have read the original Greek New Testament and would have clearly understood what the word "eternal" meant.

But Augustine however knew very little Greek. Augustine read the bible in Latin.

AN ENGLISH WORD STUDY

Webster defined eternity as "Duration or continuance without beginning or end"

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

IS ETERNITY IN SCRIPTURE TIMELESSNESS OR INFINITE TIME?

I have never heard any good arguments from the scriptures to prove eternity as

timelessness, but from my own study of the scriptures I have concluded that eternity is infinite time. That God, being an eternal being, means God has no beginning or end. And that eternal life is life without ending.

Eternity as never ending succession:

ETERNITY FOR GOD:

Job 36:26 "Behold, God is great, and we know him not, neither can the NUMBER of His YEARS be searched out."

Psa 102:27 "But thou art the same, and THY YEARS shall have NO END."

Heb 1:12 "thou art the same, and THY YEARS shall not fail."

The word "fail" here is "ekleipo" which means "cease" or "stop". So the years [time] of the Lord will never cease or stop.

ETERNITY FOR THE SINFUL:

Rev 14:11 "And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up FOREVER AND EVER: and they have no rest DAY NOR NIGHT..."

Rev 20:10 "And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented DAY AND NIGHT FOREVER AND EVER."

ETERNITY FOR THE HOLY:

Rev 4:8 "they rest not DAY AND NIGHT saying Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come"

Rev 7:15 "Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him DAY AND NIGHT in his temple."

All of these scriptures represent eternity for God, eternity for the sinful, and eternity for the holy as never ending time, as opposed to timelessness.

BIBLICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF ETERNITY:

EVERLASTING

Mat 19:29 "and shall inherit everlasting life."

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aiónios

Thayer Definition:

- 1) without beginning and end, that which always has been and always will be
- 2) without beginning
- 3) without end, never to cease, everlasting

WITHOUT END

Eph 3:21 "world without end".

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aion

Thayer Definition:

- 1) for ever, an unbroken age, perpetuity of time, eternity
- 2) the worlds, universe
- 3) period of time, age

LOGICAL ARGUMENTS

If eternity were timelessness for God:

- God could not be active. Timelessness would be a stand-still. Activity requires time. God could not think, feel, or act unless He experienced time.

If eternity were timelessness for the sinful (eternal condemnation):

- They would in fact spend no "time" in hell. They could not think or feel. They would in effect suffer no pain in hell since pain requires both conscious thought and conscious feelings. And there can be no successive consciousness without time.

If eternity were timelessness for the holy (eternal life):

- We couldn't enjoy or worship God. Enjoyment and worship requires both feeling and thought. Worship is also activity and there can be no activity without succession.

But if eternity is not frozen then eternity is active. And if eternity is active, eternity must be sequential and successive.

CONCLUSION

So from my research, as presented above, it looks like the concept of eternity as *endless time* passes three very important tests:

- **Scripture** (*it can be biblically supported*)

- **Tradition** (*it is not a novel or foreign concept*)

- **Reason** (*it makes sense and involves no contradictions or impossibilities*)

The perspective of eternity as endless time can be argued from the grounds of scripture, from the grounds of tradition, and from the grounds of reason.