



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 10 Number 2
January 14, 2015

Back to the Future!: A Christian Reflection on the Nature of Time

by Tal Davis

"Wait a minute, Doc. Are you telling me that you built a time machine out of a DeLorean?"

"The way I see it, Marty, if you're gonna build a time machine into a car, why not do it with some style?"

One of the most popular movie series of all time was the BACK TO THE FUTURE trilogy. The main characters, Marty McFly and Doc Brown, drove their DeLorean time machine back and forth from 1985 to 1955 and ahead to 2015 (and eventually back to 1885). Well, here we are: 2015! How exciting. According to Episode Two we can now run out and buy flying cars, floating-on-air hoverboards, or self-fitting talking clothes and shoes. And, amazingly, this year the National Weather Service will actually control the weather!

On the other hand, I don't know what we will do without our i-pads, i-phones, and personal computers. According to the movie, we won't have any of those items this year but we will all be carrying around portable fax machines.

The future rarely turns out the way people predict. I have, in my library, a book written in the mid-1960s about Jeane Dixon (1904-1997), a self-proclaimed prophetess and seer. She had a wide following, including numerous celebrities and even politicians. The truth is, Dixon made far more wrong predictions than the ones she got right. For example, she predicted Russia would be the first country to land a man on the moon (they still haven't). Thus, according to Deuteronomy 18:20-22 Jeane Dixon was a false prophet.

We never know how technology, society, or the world situation will go. In any case, we are all sailors through life on the sea of time. Life is like a long journey through the stream of reality going towards the future. As we travel, we are constantly creating memories of what has happened. This fact presents an interesting question for Christians and Theists in general: just what is time and what does it mean to us?

Let's look at two basic facts about the nature of time and how we Christians should understand it in relationship to how we live our lives.

First, God Created Time

The physical universe consists of four basic components: matter, energy, space, and time. All of those elements were created out of nothing. That is to say, before the creation event there was simply NOTHING. I don't mean there was no matter or energy in a vacuum of empty time and space. I mean there was no time or space for the vacuum to exist in (what I call "NOTHING-NOTHING")! When God caused the universe to begin, even time itself was born. Before that time there was no "before that time." I know this seems paradoxical and hard to grasp, but even secular physicists and astronomers are now convinced the universe and its four components, indeed, had a beginning.

In the early Twentieth Century, most secularists maintained that the universe was eternal, self-existent, and had no beginning. However, startling discoveries in astronomy and physics in the latter part of that century have virtually proven that the universe did have a beginning point. For instance, in the mid-1960s two

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scientists at Bell Laboratories, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, built a rudimentary radio telescope and unexpectedly made one of history's greatest scientific discoveries. They found that the universe contains a constant and ubiquitous low level of cosmic microwave background radiation. Their discovery was absolutely confirmed and is now known to be the remnant radiation of the initial creation moment (usually called "the Big Bang").

This fact creates a major dilemma for the non-theist. He is faced with the question of what caused the universe to begin from nothing. He has no rational answer. As the song goes, "Nothin' from nothin' leaves nothin'!"

As Theists and Christians, we answer with Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created..." The Bible teaches that God is infinitely powerful and transcendent. Transcendent means He is non-material, exists beyond and outside of time and space, and is not limited by those factors. Thus, because He has unlimited power and is transcendent in nature, He was the One who brought everything in the material universe into existence, including time. This is the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo (from nothing).

By the way, the discovery that the universe had a beginning presents major cosmological problems not just for non-theists, but also for some who are Theists. For instance, Mormonism teaches that God (called Heavenly Father), is a physical being of flesh and bone who was once a mortal man on an earth-like planet somewhere in this universe. Since he is a physical being, he is thus finite and limited by time and space. He is supposedly the descendant of an eternally backward progression of men who became gods. However, if the uni-

verse had a beginning, then that doctrine can no longer be sustained.

It is also problematic for Jehovah's Witnesses. Though they do not believe Jehovah God was ever anything but God, they do teach he exists as a finite being with a "spirit body" that is also subject to the time/space universe. If the universe had a finite beginning then where was he before then?

Second, like the Material Universe, Time Is Finite

In the past century scientists not only verified the creation event, they also discovered that the universe is finite. That is to say, it is limited in its scope. There is a point in far out space where everything ceases to exist. Though the universe is expanding, beyond it is NOTHING-NOTHING. No matter. No space. No energy. No time. Truly the cosmos is vast, but, nonetheless, it is a closed system.

Again, this testifies to the transcendence of God. He is not limited to the created universe, no matter how big it is, but exists eternally and infinitely beyond it. Now understand, this does not mean that God is some giant being living outside of space sort of looking down on it. Even that image is a distorted and limiting concept of deity. God is simply beyond anything we can even imagine. All we know about Him is what has been revealed in Scripture and in Christ (including His Trinitarian nature).

As Christian believers, we know that the biblical God is infinitely immense. But, unlike the Islamic concept of deity, He is not remote, unfeeling, and unknowable by humanity. Jesus demonstrated that God cares because, as Paul said in Philippians 2:6-8, He was God incarnate who entered His creation to redeem it.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something

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to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing (relative to His infinitude) by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross! (NIV)

This clearly indicates that God cares intimately for his creation and humanity. We can speak to Him and know Him as a close friend. He is "Immanuel - God with us!"

All this being said, the Christian has a practical concern about time's relationship to the Christian life. Human life is essentially a journey through the stream of reality of matter, space, energy, and time (and humanity is the only earthly creature aware of it). The same is true for Christians except that we relate all things to God and His will. Given this truth, as Christians we must be willing to analyze and reflect on the past, live circumspectly and wisely in the present, then go forward boldly into the future with faith and confidence.

Have you ever wondered what is meant by the term "now?" Just what is now? Think about it: now is not now... now! As soon as we say it is "now," "now" is gone into the past. Physicists try to narrow time to its shortest interval, cutting it down even to nanoseconds (millionths of a second). But even that does not absolutely define NOW. Practically, we tend to measure time in terms of years (2015), months (January), weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds... So "now" is perceived as this minute, or this hour, or today, etc.

So, life is a fleeting progression of "nows." Therefore, it is vital we are in God's will now, for as we face the future, now becomes the meaningful past and determines the future. Again, all this must be understood in

relationship to God for whom everything is NOW!

As Paul told the elders in Ephesus as he turned his face to return to Jerusalem where he did know what his future held:

"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. (PAST)

"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem (PRESENT), not knowing what will happen to me there (FUTURE). I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace." (Acts 20:18-24 NIV)

No one knows what the future will be. We cannot get in a time machine like Marty and Doc and see what will happen. (Actually, according to the theory of relativity, travel forward through time is possible [astronauts actually experience it on a miniscule level], but there is no theory for going backward.)

Unless we die today or Jesus returns, we will all move forward into the future. But for most people, it's like looking down a long foggy tunnel. They only see what is directly ahead and can't see the bigger picture. For

some of them, it is like a dark shaft with no way out.

For the Christian, we can look ahead with confidence. The same God who created time and the whole universe knows our destinies. He sees it all from beginning to end! He lights the way and the destination at the end is clear. We have no guarantees, but, live or die, the future is in God's hand. Even a DeLorean can't beat that!

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