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Time for God: Christian Stewardship and the Gift of Time

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We tend to take space and time for granted, as basic categories of human existence. They exist as the framework of the world in which we

live, but observing the detail, the form, the structure and the significance of such basic elements is not easy. Usually they are the means by which we analyse objects which exist in space and events which occur in time, rather than being themselves entities and events to be investigated and examined. It is easier to comprehend the objects which exist in space than the space in which the objects exist. It is a more straightforward process to analyse the movement or the change which occurs to entities than to examine the time or duration through which that change occurs. Yet it is, obviously, of the utmost significance that to be human is to exist in time and space and to be conditioned by those realities. The aim of this paper is to investigate the nature of time and the implications for an understanding of the stewardship of time.

The first observation is that our perceptions and experiences of time vary according to individual experi-

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ences, psychological types and age. Attitudes to time vary according to whether one is sixteen years old, or whether one is middle aged and reflecting on time passed or whether one has cancer and is facing death within three months. They also vary significantly, according to culture.

It is obvious that in western cultures and in cultures influenced by western thought and behaviour there is a tremendous consciousness of time as a commodity to be used. Time is measured with an ever-increasing precision and attention. The digital watch exists as a symbol of the ordering and measuring of personal time in hours, minutes and seconds. What is the time? It is not 'rainy season', it is not even 'Tuesday' (measured by days and nights), or 'late morning' (measured by the position of the sun) or 'about a quarter to eleven' (measured by the sweep of hands on an analogue clock), it is 10:43:07 (measured by the numerical display of a digital watch and accurate to a second or two in a month). It is a precise and commonly shared time and it has ceased to be a purely western conception as it spreads with the shrinking world. Attitudes to time change simultaneously with changes to attitudes to space. The shrinking of space through travel has led to the refinement of time measurement.

- The arrival of the train in Europe heralded the beginning of a new experience of time. Previously each village or town had been concerned only with keeping time for itself and in a fairly generalised fashion. With the train there was a need for timeta-

bles, for precise time keeping and for more accurately agreed times. The advent of air travel has extended the need for and the influence of, schedules, timetables and common agreement about time.

- The Melanesian Christian may think nothing of arriving for a meeting several hours, or even days, after the nominated time and then interprets the impatience of the waiting westerner missionary as sinful. The western person, from his or her point of view is only concerned about the 'waste' of precious time. In Egypt timekeeping shows social position: those of lower rank must come on time while those of equal rank arrive for an appointment an hour 'late' to show their independence.

- Western time is linear, but in much of Africa it is episodic and discontinuous with many different sorts of time: ritual time, agricultural time, seasonal time and lunar time which relate in complex ways. In the Australian aboriginal 'dream-time' time does not exist as a horizontal line extending through a series of pasts but is in a vertical relationship to the present. The past underlies and is within the present, 'events do not happen now, as a result of a chain of events extending back to a long past period—a "Dreamtime"—a beginning. They exist and they happen because that Dreamtime is also here and now. It is The Dreaming, the condition or ground of existence.'¹ It

¹ W.E.H. Stanner in his discussion of the interpretation of A.P. Elkin in 'Some Aspects of Aboriginal Religion' in M. Charlesworth (ed), *Religious Business: Essays on Australian Aboriginal Spirituality* (Cambridge University press, 1998), p. 20.

is sacred-past-in-the-present

- In some cultures land is more important than time. It ties people to their ancestors, heroes and gods in a way that time cannot. It is not possible to go back in time to live with the great ones but it is possible to go to the places where these events took place. It is possible to go to the place where Rama rested, where Mahatma passed by, where the enemy was defeated. In this way the past mingles with the present and those of the present come into contact with their gods, their heroes and their forebears.² In this context the saving of space is more important than the saving of time which might be achieved if, for example, a road was put through the space.

In the eleventh book of his *Confessions* Augustine expressed his desire 'to discover the fundamental nature of time and what power it has'. Uncovering the nature of time means discovering much about our understanding of culture, God and ourselves.

Different senses of time can lead to conflicts

Christian faith transforms many aspects of life but does not replace every dimension of life and culture. Indeed the expression of faith is itself influenced by cultural forms and understandings. We therefore have to face the question of how culturally based attitudes to time and space affect our attitudes to God, the spiritual life and stewardship.

In the college where I am involved in training people for Christian ministry it is possible to see different attitudes to the stewardship of time in different generations. In this context one has to ask whether one generation's understanding of time, and therefore of the stewardship of time, which is worked out in an essentially modern culture is the best approach for ministry in an increasingly post-modern generation.

Questions such as this immediately bring one's own presuppositions into view. It is essential to understand something of our presuppositions and to acknowledge that it is not possible to write or speak on the stewardship of time without a prior commitment, a particular perspective on time. While we may hold some elements of this view lightly and in such a way as to minimize distortions, other aspects may be more difficult to identify. I write as a middle aged, western academic, with a rhythm of life which is marked by lectures and lecture preparation, conversations with students, regular meetings, chapel services and occasional conferences. I also have particular theological perspectives on the life, death, resurrection, ascension and return of the Lord Jesus Christ, events, which provide a framework for my understanding of time. Out of these and other elements of my life and faith emerges a view of time that may be only partly recognizable and only imperfectly applicable to others. Throughout this essay there are references to the world of time which I inhabit and it is not only difficult to write for those

² Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 133.

who belong to other cultural worlds with different conceptions of time, it may in fact be impossible to have a single biblical view of the nature and stewardship of time.

God the Father as the Creator of Time

Christianity is a religion, which takes time seriously. Firstly, it is God who *creates* time and secondly, time is the context in which God *reveals* himself and *participates* in time, especially in the incarnation. Consequently, events happen in specific times time with salvific significance. Whereas from a Buddhist point of view there are countless worlds, and innumerable aeons passing through vast cycles of expansion and contraction, life and death,³ in Judeo-Christian thought there is one world whose history begins at one point and which moves towards an end, and God's purposes are worked out in time, leading to a final eternity with God.

God as the creator of time

The first words in the Old Testament, 'in the beginning...' are the starting point for an understanding of time because, with Augustine, it is best to take this as the beginning of time

³Suppose there was a great mountain of rocks, seven miles across and seven miles high, a solid mass without any cracks. At the end of every hundred years a man might brush it just once with a fine Benares cloth. That great mountain of rock would decay and come to an end sooner than ever the aeon. So long is an aeon. And of aeons of this length not just one has passed, not just a hundred, not just a thousand, not just a hundred thousand.' Sammyutta Nikaya ii. 1801, cited in Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, (Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 113.

itself, rooted in the creative activity of God rather than as a description of a creation which takes place in time. Time commences and there is nothing at all in creation 'before' this time. Aquinas did not think that the idea of creation necessarily ruled out the possibility of an eternal world with no beginning to time. He argued that as God's nature is to be eternally creative it is possible for creation to be without a beginning even though it is contingent and dependent. Nonetheless, as Genesis asserts a beginning, he rejected the idea of an eternal creation.⁴ Much but by no means all contemporary cosmology is consistent with this, including the expansion of the universe, the presence of cosmic microwave background and the ratio of hydrogen-helium (the results of the big bang).⁵

Time is not a pre-existing framework or an attribute of God's nature, it is God's time, created with a beginning, and it is flowing and linear. But time is not an artificial abstraction, an independent entity; it is filled with a sequence of events with purpose, meaning, and destiny.⁶ God works in time with unfathomable patience. Not only is a thousand years as a day to God (Psalm 90:4) but he has taken 15 billion years to get to the point where we are now. Clearly God is in

⁴ *Summa Theologica* Part 1, Qn 46, Art 2

⁵ L. Fagg, *The Becoming of Time: Integrating Physical and Religious Time* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) p. 99.

⁶ The linear concept of time was only robbed of its Christian character of expectation and anticipation when it become an independent, formal category of thought in Kant—an *a-priori* form of perception along with an *a-priori* view of space.

no hurry. There is no rush. He is YHWH 'I am who I am' (Ex. 3:14) or, equally, 'I will be who I will be', the one who is transcendent and beyond simple, temporal determination by time. God is eternal (Deuteronomy 33:27).

The nature of God's work in the world: through time or into time?

The way in which God is interpreted as being at work in the world will influence the way that the stewardship of time is perceived. Firstly, our understanding of God is affected because the way the eternal God works in time can be interpreted in terms of whether the focus of attention falls upon the miraculous, initial creation *ex nihilo* of the world or on the amazing continuous process *creatio continua*.

- If God is primarily understood as the God who is seen at work in the first miraculous act of divine creation then it is likely that one's understanding of God's present action in the world will be that of a God who intervenes directly in events in order to bring about his purposes.

- On the other hand if someone understands God's relationship to the world primarily in terms of God's continuing creative purposes then they are more likely to understand God's action in the present in a less interventionist, more 'natural' way.

This difference in attitude can be illustrated by reference to one specific example, that of attitudes to God's work in Bible translation. Those who agree that this important work must be led and guided by God can still express their understanding in different ways. If God is primarily con-

ceived of in terms of *creatio ex nihilo*—as creatively innovative and as an interventionist God—then the focus is more likely to be on the miraculous and interventionist way God is at work in the lives of individuals, often directly and dramatically inspiring people to undertake the work of Bible translation in a manner not consistent with any natural process. The focus of attention on God's work falls on the present and on the immediacy of the situation. 'Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6:2) expresses this attitude.

On the other hand a view which is more derived from an understanding of *creatio continua*—in which God is continuously and progressively operative in inexorable processes—is more consistent with the fact that God has not yet miraculously, instantaneously, brought into being a single, fully translated New Testament, nor even a part of it. Translations come as the result of a long and painstaking process of work and research. This view is more focused on the whole breadth of God's historic activity in the world with a perspective which looks to the future with a certainty that, whatever the present situation, God will ultimately work out his purposes in his own good time. 'My times are in your hands' (Ps. 31:15) is a representative text for this view.⁷

⁷ And this is a hymn representative of this way of thinking:

God is working His purpose out, as year succeeds to year:

God is working His purpose out, and the time is drawing near –

Nearer and nearer draws the time—the time that

Obviously, these perspectives are in no way contradictory but are complementary, and an understanding of the stewardship of time needs to take both into account. It is possible for an individual's understanding of the stewardship of time to be influenced by their understanding of the way God acts in the world. Clearly, then, our examination of time leads to an uncovering of our understanding of ourselves and our understanding of God as much as it leads to an understanding of time itself.

The dual nature of time

The fact that different personalities and different cultures view time so differently points to a fundamental duality in which the objective measurement of time does not explain or account for subjective experiences and interpretations. A Christian stewardship of time needs to recognize and deal with both subjective and objective aspects of time. At the most basic level we can measure time by the careful precision of a digital watch, counting seconds and observing hours, while subjectively we experience time not in discrete blocks but as an ever moving stream, unmarked, unbroken and sometimes special, almost revelatory and cer-

tainly intensified. In critical circumstances, such as an accident, time can appear to be dilated and an individual can experience a sequence of events in a way that seems to stretch time. In religious experience a person can feel as though they have known a quality of time which is almost transcendent. We need to interpret these experiences of time—both the normal flow of events and the apparently transcendent experiences—in a way which is integrated with our fundamental beliefs.

The philosophical division of time into objective and subjective aspects extends back, in western thought, to the speculations of the Greeks such as Heraclitus and Parmenides and, in particular to Plato's division of the cosmos, separating the temporal, natural world from the non-temporal, eternal world of ideals.

In the present day the universal and objective structure of time is described by the conception of time derived from the work of Isaac Newton. In his thinking the various objects in space and events in time are to be found as the contents of a fixed, transcendent space-time that is ontologically prior to the contents of the universe. Newton identified space and time with the omnipresence and eternity of God, which together constitute the infinite container of all creaturely existence.⁸ Space and time are considered absolutely in themselves without

shall surely be,

When the earth shall be filled with the glory of
God as the waters cover the sea.

All we can do is nothing worth, unless God blesses
the deed;

Vainly we hope for the harvest-tide, till God gives
life to the seed;

Yet nearer and nearer draws the time—the time
that shall surely be,

When the earth shall be filled with the glory of
God as the waters cover the sea.

[Arthur Campbell Ainger (1841-1919)]

⁸ His discussion of absolute time and space is to be found in his *Principia* preceding the formulation of the three laws of motion.

relation to anything external. They are absolute and unchanging and they embrace all things within the universe and as such they are the ultimate reference system. This gives expression to Newton's belief in the rationality and intelligibility of the universe as created by God.

While modern western culture has focused on the *objective* structure of time, other cultures have paid more attention to the second side of time, the *experiential* dimension in which time is examined from the perspective of the experience of the individual. Postmodern western interpretations of time have also been more interested in the subjective experience. However, this is not new for Augustine's interest in time involved relating the experiential dimension to the objective. Time, for Augustine, is not an absolute.⁹ Time is real and present, but it is by no means absolute, nor even objective: 'It is in my own mind, then, that I measure time. I must not allow my mind to insist that time is something objective.'¹⁰

What is time? Augustine finds the most satisfying answer in terms of relationships— not the external relations of bodies, but instead the internal relations of the soul. Time is essentially a process of mental comparison. It is with the mind that we measure time.¹¹ We are able to know time precisely because it is a capacity of the person, a function of the soul. 'It is an extension of the mind

itself.'¹² His interpretation of time as a measure of the soul prepared the way for the relational view of time of Plotinus in such a way as to be, ultimately, consistent with Einstein's relativistic view of time. The theory of relativity has reminded us that there is no absolute time. Just as there is no space without an object, so too there is no moment without an action and no person without a relation. Time is the form and shape of our actions and we must talk of time *for whom*.

The fundamental implication of these reflections on the dual nature of time is to remind us that time is not to be understood solely in an objective, objectified and, ultimately commodified manner. Scientifically, the Newtonian *receptacle* concept of time and space has been replaced by the *relational* theory of time and space of Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg and others. The result is that instead of understanding time as a line it is understood as a succession of states of personal activity.

The same sort of transformation is needed theologically, as Augustine understood. A Christian stewardship of time must understand time as a subjective-objective entity which needs to be seen in terms of quality and relationship as much as in terms of quantity and functionality. Unfortunately, much of western thought, including Christian theology is still permeated with a purely objectified and functionalised view of time, as exemplified in time management

⁹ This is a consequence of the created status of time (*Confessions* 11:14-16).

¹⁰ *Confessions* 11:27

¹¹ *Confessions* 11:24.

¹² *Confessions* 11:26.

theory, some of which is utilized by Christians as though it summed up an appropriate view of Christian stewardship of time.

Western thinking has taken the legitimate duality of subjective and objective and has tended to turn an entity with dual aspects into a dichotomy of time which is related to other modernist dichotomies: subject-object; secular-sacred; fact-value and so forth. This has led to a ready acceptance of a biblical justification for this which is based on a distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*. But the distinction is not biblically viable and it contributes to a theological dualism.¹³

Our first task is to think *holistically* rather than just *sequentially*. The conceptual distinction between *kairos* and *chronos* is based on a dualism that needs to be overcome. It is a notion that some times are special and that God sometimes acts in a *kairos* manner while other times are simply *chronos*—chronological time, ordinary time. This view of God seeks to affirm miraculous and special divine intervention in the world but it does so at the expense of divine involvement in processes at other times. It is a view which is reflected in, and which finds justification in the Old Testament distinction between the Sabbath and the other six days of the week and in the dis-

inction between festival days—those special times in which God's redemptive activities are recalled—and other days. It is a view which, in our day, can be referred to as the split between secular and sacred and at its most extreme it is associated with a puritanical attitude that other times are evil.

God the Son as the Redeemer of Time

God created space and time; just as space was filled with creatures, time was filled with days, six days of work and one Sabbath day. Compared with the six days of creative work, the Sabbath was a time *to be* rather than *to do*, and this time was always of greater significance. It was the special day of God's creation. He surely did not rest because he was tired from his six days of work. The Sabbath was not a day to recover strength, but it was a day in which God rested in and appreciated his creation.

It is right to see God's work in creation as justification for a high value for human work but we must also see that God is not an eternal fidget who continually and obsessively creates and who cannot stop and rest, and enjoy, and appreciate the creation and his children. God is not a model for workaholics! This time of resting in, and appreciating the world and its creator was to be equally important for the children of Israel. Even in busy times the Sabbath was to be observed (Ex. 34:21). It was a provision from God (Ex. 20:8), incorporating the principle of rest and the appreciation of God, humanity and

¹³ While this has become a well-known expression it is not entirely justifiable in biblical terms and it also contains within it the seeds of an inappropriate dichotomy which was shown in James Barr's *Biblical Words for Time*, (London: SCM, 1962). These two words show oppositions in certain contexts and none in others. Compare, for example, Mark 1:15 (*kairos*) with Gal 4:4 (*chronos*).

creation. The Sabbath does not have just a recharging function as though it is just a break to enable us to return to work. It is the supreme day of the week and a delight for us (Isaiah 58:13). Breaking this commandment leads to stress in our lives, disorder in the world and alienation from God.

However, the significance and the role of the Sabbath were transformed in the ministry of Jesus (Mark 2:27). It meant a transformation of the understanding of time. Jesus' attitude to, and stewardship of time, expressed in his reinterpretation of the Sabbath can be compared to his transformation of the Old Testament attitude to money which is found in his reinterpretation of the notion of the tithe. Just as the tithe represents the Old Testament attitude to the use of material things, the Sabbath represents the Old Testament attitude to the use of time. One marks out a certain proportion of material possessions as being dedicated to God and the other marks out a certain part of the week as especially dedicated to God.

However, not only does Jesus not say anything positive about the tithe, the only time it is mentioned is when he condemns those who practise it while ignoring weightier matters of justice (Luke 11:42). Jesus could not affirm a theology of the tithe, as it was practised then, because it implied a misunderstanding of the call of God on the *entire* resources of the disciples. Jesus could not suggest in any way that it was enough to offer ten percent to God while retaining ninety percent for oneself. His claim

was on everything. It is the same with the Sabbath—there cannot be the merest suggestion that only one part of the week belongs to God. The reality is that *all times* are God's times and the Sabbath is to permeate every part of life. Every day is an opportunity to acknowledge God.

One of the consequences of this is that we need patterns of timekeeping which liberate us, rather than confine us. This is not to say we necessarily turn away from an actual pattern of six days of work and one Sabbath day but, depending on the context and the person and the need, there may be other ways of expressing our faith. As Paul says, in the context of a debate presumably between Gentile and Hebrew Christians concerning the significance of special days such as the Sabbath,

one man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day observes it in honour of the Lord. He who also eats, eats in honour of the Lord (Rom. 14:5).

A Christian view of the stewardship of time need not fall back into attitudes and forms of observance which perpetuate the present cultural dualism of secular and sacred. We have freedom from the Old Testament view of the Sabbath and festivals and there is the opportunity for every moment to be Christ filled. The transition from Jewish Sabbath to Christian Sunday should lead to a continual and profound celebration of the fact that Jesus is risen and an eternal Sabbath has now begun (Heb. 4:3,10,11). Other festivals are also transformed: the Passover is fulfilled

in Christ and now celebrated continually (1 Cor. 5:78). In worship we become one with Christians across space and time. We need less divided and less linear time: eternity is in the present time (John 6:54, 68).

It is our responsibility in our stewardship of time to continue the work of the Reformation and to eliminate the split of secular from sacred that the Reformers began to do with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. If we allow the division to remain, then secular work is only good to provide for the spiritual and God's activity is really found only in occasional acts and at certain times. In this context Christian stewardship becomes the preservation and efficient use of time for what seem to be the particularly sacred, separate and special acts of evangelism, worship and fellowship rather than the transformation of all times, including the most ordinary and the most 'secular', into times for God. We must avoid any concept of the stewardship of time which perpetuates, or even accentuates by its efficiency, the present dualism which pervades much western and other modern Christianity in which 'gathered church' is separated from, and given priority over, 'scattered church' and in which the sacred is still separate from the secular.

Western culture now celebrates 'the weekend' which is a direct descendant of the concept of the Sabbath rest and Sunday celebration. However, in many respects it has become a time of indulgence and excess as well as a time of recreation and renewal. It is a descendant of the

Sabbath but, just as children can sometimes lose the faith of their parents while retaining the form of religion, the weekend has lost faith and has become a wayward and very secularised child of the Sabbath.

Leisure, as commonly understood, is not the same as the appreciative and relational rest of the Sabbath. The frustrations of work and the pursuit of pleasure lead to an obsession with leisure activities. If the split of secular and sacred times ended and if there was more Sabbath in every workday then it might mean that there would be less of a need for self-indulgent leisure.

A proper stewardship of time means seeing the divine possibilities in every moment and living each and every day in the presence of God. It also means helping our societies understand the spiritual dimension of work, relationships and leisure in every day and time. When we seek God's kingdom (Matt. 6:33) what we seek is not the efficient use of time but the presence of God's grace in time which transforms and redeems it. Christian stewardship is not just a matter of how individuals preserve and use their time. It is matter of how the church influences society in its attitudes towards time and every dimension of life.

The compression of time

Two aspects of time which need to be redeemed and which cannot be transformed by individuals alone relate to the apparent *compression* of time and an attendant loss of hope, and the *commodification* of time and an associated attempt to control the future.

In modern society mechanisation, computerisation and technology have increased the speed at which things are done. Communication, manufacture, distribution, travel, and the rate of consumption have all increased dramatically. Fashions, trends, ideas and values are increasingly ephemeral. Indeed, we may be facing a crisis in the interpretation of time. Pre-modern societies focused on the past and found meaning in the maintenance of traditions which validated communal values and social mores.

Modern society is different precisely because the focus has shifted from past to future. In modern society meaning and purpose is found in the attempt to control the future. The postmodernist has lost confidence, however, in any sort of meta-narrative and thus cannot see the future under control in the way that the modernist can. What meaning there is, is found purely in the present instant. It has been argued that the postmodern shift has come about precisely because of a crisis in our experience of space and time.¹⁴

For the postmodern history has effectively ended—in the sense that there is an end to the integrative effect of meta-narrative. In the post-modern framework there is no escape from the problems which modernism and the decline of optimism in secular hope have produced. Meaning can, at best, be found only in the present. Nietzsche—a postmodern thinker in the

heyday of modernism—proclaimed the death of God and the end of truth and morality as objective and universal values. The modern, secular vision was, for Nietzsche, merely an atheist continuation of Christian values that had failed to see that the death of God meant the death of meaning and progress in history. He offered an anti-meta-narrative of eternal recurrence: if there really is no meaning then all that is left is a repeat of the present. [‘Is that all there is?’ Yes]. To live without meta-narrative, liberated from Christian and modern dreams, means to live and affirm the totality of life just as it is. But Nietzsche knew that it would take a Superman to do this.¹⁵

This does not mean that we need a return to modern or even pre-modern forms, although there may be much wisdom in an examination of pre-modern Christianity. There is though a need for a biblical meta-narrative and a return to the hope it proclaims. What is needed is a future destiny that can give meaning to the present time. The Christian stewardship of time in postmodern context will not look very much like the stewardship of time in a modern context. This is not to say that either a modern or a postmodern perspective is to be judged theologically preferable. They are simply different and Christian faith must relate differently to each of them. Modernism, for instance, shares with authentic biblical faith a definite and positive view of the future, albeit a secularized and

¹⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1990), p. 201.

¹⁵ Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999).

therefore deceptive vision in which the future emerges out of the present actions of human effort, rather than from the in-breaking action of God. Christian stewardship in the post-modern context will therefore need to be very different as it must deal with both a scepticism towards any sort of future and a focus on the present moment. In every situation, though, Christian faith must transform past, present and future and show Christ in every moment.

Commodification of time

At the same time there is an increase in the commercialization and commodification of time. It is well known that 'time is money' and time is bought and sold through employment and industrialization. It is controlled through management and carefully preserved as a precious possession. Those of us in wealthy societies give things as presents rather than giving time, unless we wish to give a gift of utmost value to those whom we treasure most. Generally, we give what we have most of, which is material things, while keeping back what is most scarce, most limited and most valued. In this context the question arises as to how much time we really have for others (Matt. 25:34-36).

The commodification of time and the resultant questions about how this precious commodity should be used have produced the time management industry. Time management is an ever changing philosophy. There are generations of time management theories that have developed over the past forty years from a few significant books into a

huge industry with consultants, management training and time gurus. There are a number of different approaches with different underlying philosophies. Some focus on lack of personal order, others find the problem in other people, while still others emphasize the need to focus to achieve what you want. For some Christians this is what the stewardship of time is all about: control, efficiency, order and the ultimate preservation of time without any waste.

The underlying ethos of the various time management theories, especially the first generation theories, includes the belief that life is about maximised efficiency and frequently that technology can be the answer: the right computer, the right software, the right planner. Christian time management consultants and authors can too easily assume the same perspective, even if the ultimate uses of time differ. There can be in Christian thought as much as in secular time management:

- a lack of critical analysis of the place of values in determining what to do,
- the evacuation of life of relationships,
- and even an attitude which treats other people as the enemy.

One author, writing on behalf of a major mission agency suggested that

life is a contest... what does it take to live a fuller life? Determination, skill, effort and the right environment ... [y]ou have two main opponents in your fight for a more effective life. The first opponent is yourself; the second is everyone else! You

use your time and other people use your time.¹⁶

This author wants to place the individual in control of their life and future. It is of primary importance that individuals live their lives as they plan it. If the one's schedule or the plan is not followed then one's life is a failure.

Jesus told a story about those who seek to control the future (Luke 12:13-21). The parable of the rich fool is a denial of the rich man's belief that he could secure his future. It is a declaration of the fact that all time is God's. The same message is found in James (4:13-17); we cannot treat this as though it is a message only for those who are ungodly. However, there is a message for a Christian stewardship of time—that we cannot force the kingdom to come any more than a rich man can guarantee the enjoyment of future prosperity.

The disciples too were planning and wanting to know the future (Matt. 24:3 and Acts 1:67) and were told, 'it is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority'. Like the disciples we too can want to know God's plans for the establishment of his kingdom. And we can want this from the best of motives, so that we can, as stewards, use our time and work effectively for the coming kingdom. But all stewardship is in God's hands. Time is a gift of God rather than just a commodity. A commodity is something which can be pre-

served and stored and used at our discretion but time is transient, a daily, hourly gift of God.

Later forms of time management have gone beyond efficiency analysis and past purely technological solutions to focus on the inner self. Some are psychological and aim to deal with significant flaws in the psyche which may be the result of environment or heredity and which produce a personal scripting which leads to dysfunctional time management. There are eastern as well as western forms of this approach which can emphasize a 'go with the flow' emphasis on natural harmony, getting in touch with natural rhythms and seeking a congruity of inner self and life flow. The precise form of analysis however, makes little difference if it goes no further than the interior self, and

where time management experts [do] look beyond the individual, they look at the institutional structures and not at the broader social and cultural dimensions. There is little awareness that time pressure is an all-pervading problem. While individuals and sometimes organisations are recognised as having problems, time pressure is not seen as endemic to our whole Western way of life ... while the time management approach urges people to define their goals, it does not encourage them to think whether these goals ultimately lie outside the purely secular understandings of life.¹⁷

It is possible to note, in passing, that the culturally specific dimension of the stewardship of time emerges strongly here. The most basic message in this is that there need to be a number of patterns of the Christian

¹⁶ David Cormack, *Seconds Away! Fifteen Rounds in the fight for the Effective Use of Time* (MARC, 1986), pp. 12, 27 and 32.

¹⁷ Robert Banks, *The Tyranny of Time* (Richmond: Lancer, 1983), p. 163

stewardship of time which relate to different cultural forms and actions.

As far as time management is concerned, the situation has changed to some extent. Traditional time management is based on control and efficiency and aims to accomplish what you want; other people are essentially seen as resources that can contribute to the fulfilment of your goals. But the more recent, fourth generation time management theories take a broader view¹⁸ and seek to include values as well efficiency, leadership as well as management, relationships as much as results, the spiritual as well as the physical and the social as well as the institutional. The approach is summed up in the following story.

I attended a seminar once where the instructor was lecturing on time. At one point he said, 'Okay, time for a quiz.' Then he reached under the table and pulled out a wide-mouthed gallon jar. He set it on the table next to a platter with some fist-sized rocks on it. 'How many of these rocks do you think we can get in the jar?' he asked. After we made our guess, he said, 'Okay. Let's find out.' He set one rock in the jar ... then another ... then another. I don't remember how many he got in, but he got the jar full. Then he asked, 'Is the jar full?' Everybody looked at the rocks and said, 'Yes.' Then he said, 'Ahhh.' He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. Then he dumped some gravel in and shook the jar and the gravel went in all the little spaces left by the big rocks. Then he grinned and said once more, 'Is the jar full?' By this time we were on to him. 'Probably not,' we said. 'Good!' he replied. And he reached under the table and

brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand in and it went into all of the spaces left by the rocks and the gravel. Once more he looked at us and said, 'Is the jar full?' 'No!' we all roared. He said, 'Good,' and grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in. He got something like a quart of water in that jar. Then he said, 'Well, what's the point?' Somebody said, 'Well, there gaps, and if you really work hard at it, you can always fit more into your life.' 'No,' he said, 'that's not the point. The point is this: if you hadn't put the big rocks in first, would you ever have gotten them in?'¹⁹

The 'big rocks' are interpreted as important values such as family, faith, education—whatever the individual conceives them to be. This illustration cleverly uses pre-existing assumptions about time management techniques to make a deeper point about values, and at the same time it indicates the shift in time-management thinking. Nonetheless, it tends to treat time as a *commodity* rather than a *gift* and even though values are now included, time management remains essentially focused on the self. The aim is to gain time to achieve values for oneself. Finally and perhaps most significantly it also suffers from the assumption that the problems of time are individual ones, to be resolved by personal management but there are also a cultural, systemic issues in which the problems of overwork, stress and insufficient time cannot be solved unilaterally. We have structured them into western society and, perhaps especially, into western Christian atti-

¹⁸ Typified by Stephen Covey and A. Roger Merrill *First Things First* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994) and Stephen Covey *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (NY Simon and Schuster, 1989)

¹⁹ Stephen Covey and A. Roger Merrill *First Things First* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994) p. 88.

tudes towards ministry.

Christ in time

Although God is beyond time, yet Christ entered time. He came in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:2) and promises to be with us till the end of time (Matt. 28:20). In short, Christian time is centred on the person of Christ. Spiritual fulfilment is found in Christ, in looking back at his life and death (1 Cor. 11:25), in the awareness of his presence (Eph. 3:17) and in hope and expectation of his future return (1 Thess. 4:15). We live in a short stretch of time that moves *from Christ to Christ* (Col. 1:15-20).

Kosuke Koyama suggests that God works at the speed at which a person walks: three mile an hour God. 'God walks slowly because he is love. If he is not love he would have gone much faster. Love has its speed ... and it is a different speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed.'²⁰ Christ's coming 'in the fullness of time' is the finest example of his patience.

The basis for a Christian understanding of time is a theology of the cross. In the cross all times, and eternity meet. In the cross is salvation for all, and for all times. In the cross we find the eternal purposes of God revealed. Christians share in eternity because Christ shared our temporality. We are now able to share in the life of God through union with Christ in the power of the Spirit. Christian stewardship of time therefore means using this time rightly and correctly, which means sharing, in this time

and in all times, in the life of God. It means understanding the time and getting our priorities right. And this does not mean accumulating more time—God has plenty of that—it means doing whatever we do 'in Christ'.

For some people detailed time management can be a support to their spiritual life. There is no doubt that, for the disorganized, the advice must be to plan times with the Lord very carefully. In this way the schedule can be *supportive* of the spiritual life. However, we must recognise the danger of a schedule that perpetuates a division of life into secular and sacred. If we only think in terms of a compartmentalisation of prayer time, worship time and church time on the one hand and mealtime, leisure time and work time on the other, then we diminish the role of God in our lives. We must recognize the potential for the schedule to be *subversive* of the spiritual life when it restricts God to certain compartments of our life and, equally worryingly, leads to an over-emphasis on the need to continually work for the Lord without re-creation or Sabbath rest. In saying this there is no intention to decry hard work for the kingdom, but we must avoid any suggestion that we live by a doctrine of justification by works, as though we alone are the essential means by which the kingdom comes.

If we recommend careful planning for the disorganized it is also necessary to recommend masterful inaction for the unhealthily busy. Michael Leunig is an Australian cartoonist-philosopher with a wistful, gentle

²⁰ Kosuke Koyama, *The Three Mile an Hour God* (London: SCM, 1979) 7.

approach to life. In a series of thoughtful and penetrating cartoons he writes ‘the Curly-Pyjama Letters’ from Mr Curly to Vasco Pyjama in which he dwells on the meaning of various aspects of modern life. Vasco Pyjama asks the question, ‘What is worth doing and what is worth having?’ Mr Curly responds by saying, ‘I would like to say simply this. It is worth doing nothing and having a rest; in spite of all the difficulty it may cause, you must rest Vasco—otherwise you will become restless!’

Leunig has put his cartoonist’s finger on an important dimension of modern life. The essential ‘rest’ which is needed can be interpreted, from a Christian perspective, as a rest that includes the Sabbath rest of resting in, and appreciating God and creation. But it also has immediate application for those who are not Christian but who recognize in what Leunig says, firstly a most damaging part of our society—tiredness, and secondly a most neglected dimension of life—that of rest. Leunig continues,

I believe the world is sick with exhaustion and dying of restlessness. While it is true that periods of weariness help the spirit to grow, the prolonged, ongoing state of fatigue to which our world seems to be rapidly adapting, is ultimately soul destroying as well as earth destroying. The ecology of evil flourishes and love cannot take root in this sad situation.

Of course, Leunig is speaking into a particular cultural situation, that of the modern city and modern patterns of work in which it is possible to discern, amongst many other contradictory as well as confirmatory trends, a shift towards greater levels

of spiritual, emotional and physical tiredness.²¹

Mr Curly continues his cultural analysis with the observation that

tiredness is one of our strongest, most noble and instructive feelings. It is an important aspect of our conscience and must be heeded or else we will not survive. When you are tired you must have that feeling and you must act upon it sensibly—you *must* rest like the trees and animals do. Yet tiredness has become a matter of shame! This is a dangerous development. Tiredness has become the most suppressed feeling in the world. Everywhere we see people overcoming their exhaustion and pushing on with intensity—cultivating the great mass mania which all around is making life so hard and ugly—so cruel and meaningless—so utterly graceless—and being congratulated for overcoming it and pushing it deep down inside themselves as if it were a virtue to do this.

What a Christian view of stewardship must not do is contribute to tiredness and exhaustion. We must not encourage a culture of exhaustion. An addiction to work is potentially a denial of the doctrine of justification by grace in favour of justification by works done to please God. There can be no hint of any presumption that we are indispensable to God. There is real truth in the belief that God achieves what he does *despite* us as much as he does through us. We need to keep time in balance, with appropriate time for sleep, work, recreation and relationships. If we do not do this, Leunig warns us, then ‘when such strong

²¹ The interpretation of trends in modern society is not easy, most industrial societies have exhibited a complicated trend towards increased free time, while at the same time believing themselves to be subject to greater time pressure.

and natural feelings are denied—they turn into the most powerful and bitter poisons with dreadful consequences. We live in a world of those consequences.’

What is the solution to this? In Leunig’s cartoon the answer is, very appropriately, rest. At the very least this means a physical and mental rest from the work that we do. For Christians it will include resting in God. Mr Curly urges Vasco ‘to learn to curl up and rest—feel your noble tiredness—learn about it and make a generous place for it in your life and enjoyment will surely follow. I repeat: it’s worth doing nothing and having a rest.’

Our rest should include a genuine retreat and removal from our work and it will also involve us in worship and prayer. This worship and prayer that is separate and set-apart in time should be fully integrated with the whole of our daily life. Worship, prayer and Christian ministry should permeate every moment of every day in every activity in which we are involved. As we do that the tiredness we feel (and which will still require us to rest) will not be so stressful. It will produce in us a sense of satisfaction and peace as we recognize the presence of Christ in all times and in all things that we do.

A Christian stewardship of time will work towards creating a Christian environment in which believers can understand clearly how they can live a life of faith in every moment of the time which has been given by God. It must help believers to learn how to avoid the stress and tiredness

which modern life can produce.²² In more general terms, in a way that relates this principle to other cultural systems of time-keeping, Christian stewardship should not be so personalised that it does not challenge social systems and cultural norms which are contrary to, or destructive of, the exercise of full humanity.

Indefinite life-span

One very significant change to the human experience of time may come in a few years. It is a serious possibility that a new form of genetic science will be able to provide telomere therapy that would be available for extending the human life span indefinitely. Some suggest that this could occur between 2005 and 2015.²³ The technology involved goes beyond attempting to establish optimum standards of good health in order to achieve greater longevity, and well beyond attempts to eliminate individual diseases. Telomere therapy is aimed at investigating and manipulating the most fundamental aging mechanisms of the human body so that there can be an almost unlimited extension of human life. This is not to say that even the greatest success with telomere therapy would eliminate death. Even if this scenario turns out to be right people

²² This may speak to some and not to others, again the cultural issue is important. This is from one perspective—a modern cultural situation where there is material prosperity and spiritual poverty. What is the response from those who come from cultural situations where, for example, modernization has not taken hold where the most extreme forms of material poverty exist?

²³ M. Fossel, *Reversing Human Aging*, (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1996), p. 222.

will still be able to wear out and die and no one will be immune from other diseases and accidents. It is, however, potentially a form of indefinite lifespan.²⁴

The implications of this for career and work patterns, global population, marriage and family structures and social relationships are significant enough to guarantee a large-scale social transformation. There is nothing which makes a scientific search for this relative 'immortality' theologically wrong. For God a thousand years is as a day (Ps. 90: 4) and a life lived for two thousand years is one which can be lived in honour of God as much as one lived for three score and ten years or a life lived only for twenty minutes. A life lived for seventy years is a life lived 25,000 times longer than a life lived only for a day. Yet both can have their own completeness in God.

If people were to be able to live a hundred or more years longer than at present would that detract from the immortality of grace which is an eternity with Christ? I think not. Given the huge amount of time involved in God's work of creation prior to the presence of any human being it is hard to imagine him being concerned about a few thousand years! Extended life span is not a fundamental threat to God's control of life but it may well be a threat to significant aspects of human life and social

relationships but these will have to be dealt with elsewhere.

God the Spirit and the Present Time

We must consider the time in which we now live from a theological point of view. Jesus berated his hearers who did not know or understand the times in which they lived (Luke 12:54-56). Salvation history has come to the point where Christ has ascended to be with the Father and the Spirit has come to be with God's people. This is the time of the church and the gospel, or, even more accurately, the time of the Spirit. What are the implications of this for a stewardship of time?

It is natural to ask how long this age will last. Despite Paul's assertion to the Corinthians that their appointed time had grown very short (1 Cor. 7:29) we do not know how long this age will be (Acts 1:6) and in any case that is almost certainly not the right question to ask. We would do better to ask about the character of the age and what kind of time this is. The answer to that is given to us in the 'signs of the times'. It is a mistake to think of 'the signs of the time' (Matt. 16:13) as referring only to that short period before the end. These signs are not there to provide chronological data concerning the final coming of the kingdom (Mark 13:32).²⁵ Instead, they are a revelation of the present state of the world and the

²⁴ This is, obviously, a hugely significant topic that cannot really be expanded on here. See my article 'A New Immortality?' *Evangelical Review of Theology: Journal of the World Evangelical Fellowship* Vol. 23 No 4, (1999), pp. 363-382 for a discussion of this.

²⁵ They are sometimes taken as signs of the end of time, but, in fact, they are more accurately referred to as 'signs of not-the-end' as indicated in Luke 21:9.

present antithesis between the kingdom of God and evil. Thus, to those who can understand them, they reveal the present opposition to God²⁶ as well as God's actions in judgement²⁷ and grace.²⁸

The signs also serve to point towards the end of history (Matt. 24: 14) as well as the work of God in the present (Matt. 16: 3). The ever-present instruction is for disciples to be watchful (Matt. 24:42) and to understand the times. In our lives and ministry we are called on to *reveal* the time as much as to *use* it. We are to live this time as God's time. To *redeem* the time (Eph. 5:16 KJV 'making the most of the time' NRSV) does not mean to save it in the sense of conserving or even just using it efficiently; rather it means to save it in the sense of *transforming* it ('giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything' Eph. 5:20).

Obviously this will mean using the time for service and witness. It is a

time for caring for the poor, proclaiming the gospel, worshipping God and serving one another. But stewardship is not related to only some time and some activities. It must be something which has relevance for every moment and that means the transformation of every time: eating, working, conversing, playing, studying and even sleeping—all to the glory of God.

In doing this we must pay attention to the cultures in which we live and work. A Christian stewardship of time will be alert to the differences in regard to the understanding of time. It is necessary to avoid an over-simplified concept of stewardship which is culturally insensitive, trite or mono-cultural. In all contexts, though, we are to seek the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33) and as we do, perhaps the over-arching calling of God with respect to time is *to be* rather than *to do*, or even more precisely, *to become* the holy people of God. We do this as we express in our lives the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23) and as we worship God in our living, becoming one with God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

²⁶ Matt. 24.9—tribulation; Matt. 24:10—apostasy; 2 Thess. 2:1-3—the man of lawlessness.

²⁷ See Matt. 24:6-8: wars, earthquakes and famine.

²⁸ See Matt. 24:14—the proclamation of the gospel and Rom. 11:25-26—the sign of Israel.