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LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE: CHRISTIAN FAITHFULNESS IN A TIME FAMINE

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Busyness is one of the predominant characteristics of our age. It isn't necessary to try to prove that assertion: the proposition seems so self-evident, and the complaint so ubiquitous as to make any attempt to prove it seem superfluous. It would also seem self-evident that Christians living in such an age would be careful—and quick—to reflect biblically on it, since the press of busyness exercises such a powerful effect on their lives and culture. In point of fact, however, it is far from evident that most believers are attempting anything of the kind, even though they may complain regularly about the “shortage of time” and its accompanying problems. The leadership of the church must take the lead in thinking Christianly about the modern understanding of time and the busyness which no one claims to want, but which few appear to escape. For one thing, we are created to live in time as finite creatures, and must never assume, in a fallen world, that our view of time is fully biblical. Besides, being busy is no guarantee of Christian faithfulness. Martha was involved with “many things,” Jesus said, but that did little to impress Him since, from His perspective, “only one thing was necessary” (Luke 10: 41-42). It is of little value to have a full calendar if we have no time for what the Lord deems essential.

This is not to suggest, however, that evangelical leaders have been silent on the topic. We too sense the press of busyness in our lives and ministry, and we often exhort our

people to “seek God and His kingdom” as a first priority in their lives and commitments. If we are honest, though, experience seems to indicate that these exhortations are insufficient in themselves to solve the problem. Neither is the growth of “time management seminars” in evangelical circles, though some of them teach helpful techniques and can sometimes provide real—if temporary—relief. More is needed than exhortations and techniques because the problem of busyness, at root, is more complex than either “solution” assumes. In any case, the incidence of burnout among committed believers and church leaders should be adequate warning that a problem has infected the church—and the culture—which requires careful discernment.

My goal in this article—given the depth of the problem—is a very modest one: to identify three areas of biblical instruction which together can become the beginning point for reflecting biblically on time and the problem of busyness. I will not try to trace all the sources for our busyness, though that could be a helpful exercise. I will not even try to define the various ways in which busyness saps spiritual vitality, though that is, without doubt, of concern to the readers of this publication. There are also no techniques here, though that is not to suggest that some Christians might not profit from learning how to more effectively manage their calendars. And though I will not specifically mention Jesus’ instruction to “seek first His kingdom,” that is not to suggest that an exposition of Matthew 6 will not be part of the discernment process. Rather, these three areas are identified because they are discussion starters, opening the door for fruitful reflection, biblical teaching, and nuanced application.

1) The doctrine of creation teaches there is no “time famine.” “There simply is not enough time,” we often say. “If only we had more time!” It is highly doubtful, of course, that having more time would solve anything, for the simple

reason that if we cannot manage the amount we have been given, what makes us think we could handle more? The complaint is common enough. Its origin is not in God’s Word, but in our modern culture which prizes productivity and efficiency more than almost anything else. “The sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to the place it rises there again,” the Teacher notes. “All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it” (Eccl. 1:5,8). That Christians would be burdened with time in a fallen world is not surprising; that we so uncritically adopt a mode of whining from a fallen culture is sad. Though it is easy to imagine what we would do with the extra hour if we were suddenly granted twenty-five hours in each day, there is every reason to believe the press of busyness would continue largely unabated.

Still, the “time famine” is keenly felt, and its impact is tremendous. “The result of this famine,” Leland Ryken writes, “is that most people feel rushed and frantic in their weekly routine, as well as guilty about what they have not accomplished.”¹ And yet there is an interesting paradox here. The lack of time we feel and the press of busyness we are under is often a cause for anxiety, but in some ways we embrace it eagerly, and feel guilty if we have too much time on our hands, or are not busy enough. Listen closely to the complaints, and often there is more than a hint of pride in our busyness. Busy people are important, and their busyness proves it. One author recently asked whether “being busy in adulthood” should not be seen as similar to what “being popular” amounted to in high school.² Similar notions infect the church. I recently heard one evangelical mention that a certain speaker “may not be worth inviting,” since he was available at such short notice. Are not the really good speakers booked a year or two in advance?

One thing is certain: if we intend to think Christianly about time and busyness, we need to begin biblically, and according to Scripture, there is *no* time famine. God created

us to live and serve Him in twenty-four hour days, in a cycle of work and rest over the course of each week—and He called the arrangement “good.” We may be too busy, of course, or we might feel guilty about not doing more, but those are very different issues. There is simply no shortage of time, and for Christians to speak of a “time famine” is to call into question the wisdom of the Creator. Christ taught, healed, lived, died, and pleased the Father without ever appearing harried, and is never recorded as saying that He would have healed more lepers “if only there had been enough time.”

There is no time famine. The Christian mind does not approach the problem of busyness by bemoaning the lack of time, but by giving thanks. “I was daily His delight,” Wisdom says of the Creation, “rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in the world, His earth” (Prov. 8:30-31). God’s declaration that His creation was “very good” includes His making us fit in the time he made, and for that we can be very grateful, indeed. We have not been made for twenty-five hour days or eight-day weeks, and so there is no need to try to act as though we were. Nor do we have to feel guilty that needs remain in this sad world when we stop our work to rest as God has commanded. Rather, we can serve and love Him with gratitude, working with all our might for His glory, and then we can rest, again in gratitude, secure in the knowledge that His plans for us fit in the time He has graciously provided. We have good news for our modern world: there is no time famine, and our witness to that conviction should begin with deep gratitude for the gracious limits ordained by the Creator for us, His finite creatures, and a growing contentment born of the certainty that the twenty-four hour day is precisely what we were made for.

2) The doctrine of the fall teaches that culture and technology, though good gifts, can also have negative effects. Some busyness comes from living in this modern fallen

world. It is tempting to address the challenge of modern busyness simply as an issue of our personal priorities. We make time for what is important to us, it is often said, and if we are too busy, our priorities need to be reevaluated. “Put God first,” Christians insist, and much of what burdens our calendars will be shown to be superfluous, at best, and detrimental at worst. There is a great deal of truth in all this, of course, and most of us have experienced the freedom that comes when we learn to distinguish what is truly important from the merely urgent. Chances are that finite people in a fallen world will always need to do such reevaluation on a regular basis.

Even when we are careful to reevaluate our priorities, however, the press of busyness usually remains. The reason is that though busyness is often a problem of priorities, it is also much more than that. More specifically, some of the busyness that plagues us comes not from our poor choices, but from what we can call the structures of modern culture. Whether we realize it or not, our lives have been molded by the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution, and one result of that revolution is a faster pace to life, increased expectations, and the tendency to cram more into every minute of every day. “Technology has accelerated the pace of life,”³ Ryken notes, though too few of us have reflected deeply on what faithfulness means given the reality of that fact.

Consider this timeline which notes just a few of the inventions that have drastically altered the pace of life:

Early 1800s: trains and steamships greatly accelerated the speed of transportation and communication across long distances.

1840s: telegraph companies formed.

1875: the invention of the telephone permits instantaneous communication over distance.

- 1876: the first alarm clock appears, and punctuality becomes increasingly important.
- 1951: long-distance direct-dial phone service is introduced, making mail seem slow.
- 1953: TV dinners are introduced, making cooking seem slow.
- 1973: Fed Ex service begins, making mail seem even slower.
- 1985: Fax machines appear, making Fed Ex seem slow.
- 1990: E-mail proliferates, and faxing seems slow.

Most families have multiple automobiles, raising the expectation that family members will be in more places at the same time. We have answering machines when we are away from the phone, and call-waiting when on the phone. And though E-mail can be a helpful technology, there is a built-in expectation that E-mail messages will be answered quickly; take two weeks as if it were a letter, and you may get a second message asking about the delay.

Or think about the tasks that make up a normal day. Up until about the end of World War I, a majority of Americans lived and worked on farms or in relatively small communities. Whether a farmer or merchant, they may have worked long hours, but the tasks of earning their livelihood, getting physical exercise, and spending time with their family were often accomplished in the same time period. Today, these three tasks must, in most families, be pursued successively, with time for exercise and family added to those required to earn a living.

Or, to take another example, though call-waiting can be a helpful technology, why do we feel obligated to interrupt a conversation simply because someone else has dialed our number? Not only does this raise questions about the significance we are placing on the conversation already in progress, but it subtly complicates and increases the pace of life. This is not an argument against call-waiting; it is a plea

to reflect Christianly on the impact of technology on our lives and families. The doctrine of Creation insists we cannot see ourselves apart from human culture, and the doctrine of the fall insists that though culture and technology are good gifts, in a sinful world they may also have significant negative effects.

Recognizing such sociological realities does not absolve us from responsibility, of course, but rather serves to more accurately define the parameters of the problem. We are responsible to live faithfully, but that faithfulness must be carved out in lives that are embedded in technologies which, though useful, also tend to increase the pressure of busyness by their very existence and use. Certainly we must reevaluate our priorities, but we must also examine how the structures of modern life impinge on our time, expectations, and consciousness, and ask discerning questions about that as well.

3) We must recover the biblical teaching on calling, work and rest. Only when we know what to say "Yes" to, can we say "No" to so many good things. Another reason that exhorting people to reevaluate their priorities is of limited helpfulness is that relatively few Christians have any sense of their calling. The practical difficulty most of us face in our busyness is having to choose between an ever-growing plethora of good options. We are beneficiaries of the Industrial Revolution, which means we enjoy advances in communication and transportation which previous generations could only imagine. The dark side of this good gift, however, is that the options before us, day by day, are enormously multiplied and are growing all the time, and—here's the rub—we must choose among them. There are always more tapes to listen to, books to read, seminars to attend, and needy folks within reach. The mobility and options at our disposal in such things is remarkable compared to even one generation ago. But how can we choose

among so many good things, unless we know our particular calling before the Lord? Only if we know what we should say "yes" to, will we be able to say No to so many good opportunities to minister, learn, and fellowship.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin addresses the notion of calling in a way which seems to speak directly to our modern problem of busyness in a pluralistic culture:

[T]he Lord bids each one of us in all life's actions to look to his calling. For he knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, with what fickleness it is borne hither and thither, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once. Therefore, lest through our stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsy-turvy, he has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, he has named these various kinds of living "callings." Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.⁴

In Mark 1:35-45, Jesus is confronted with both overwhelming need and great opportunity to minister. Crowds of needy people sought Jesus the previous evening, and he ministered to them late into the night. "When evening had come, after the sun had set, they began bringing to Him all who were ill and those who were demon-possessed," Mark records. "The whole city gathered at the door" (Mark 1:32-33). The next morning He rose before light and slipped away to pray alone. The crowd reappeared, and after searching, the disciples finally found Him. "Everyone is looking for you!" they said, but His reply must have surprised them. "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages," Jesus told them, "so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." We know that Jesus made Himself avail-

able to needy people, but because He knew His calling before the Father, He could be obedient even when faced with several good options to choose from. In other words, He could say No to good things—even to meeting the needs of a waiting crowd—in order to do what was needed, and that was defined by the calling given to Him by the Father. And from what we can tell in the text, Jesus did this without sin, without guilt-feelings, without everyone necessarily understanding, and in the expectation that His disciples would follow Him.

Is it a coincidence that this decisiveness followed a period of prayer, an early morning time alone with His Father? Could it be that if we were faithful in seeking God's face we too would have a deeper assurance of what the Puritans referred to as our "specific or particular calling" before God? And will we ever be able to say No to so many good and attractive options if we don't first know what to say "Yes" to?

Oz Guinness writes:

The Christian understanding of motivation is one of the deepest, richest, and most distinctive parts of the faith. Partly expressed in such notions as serving God, pleasing God, and glorifying God, it is developed most fully in the biblical doctrine of "calling." The Christian notion of calling, or vocation, is the conviction that human existence contains a life-purpose and a life-task, namely that all we are and all we do—our identities, gifts, and responsibilities—have a direction and dynamic because they are lived out as a response to a calling, or summons, from God.⁵

But this, sadly, is a rich area of biblical teaching which has been largely lost within the evangelical community. It is difficult to understand how we can be discerning about time and the press of modern busyness if we do not see to its recovery.

Busyness is often also related to mistaken views of work and rest. Some Christians overvalue one at the expense of the other, some ignore the creational mandate that they be related in a weekly cycle, and some simply adopt cultural views of them instead of viewing them through the spectacles of Scripture. Whatever the reason for the lack, however, the problem of busyness often results simply because it occurs by default—the fact of the matter is that busyness must be intentionally kept in check or it tends to grow.

Yet, sadly, even in Reformed circles few believers seem to appreciate the wonder of the biblical order. Many approach the topic of work and rest rather legalistically, and have what appears to be a pharisaical concern with what others should and should not do on any particular day. Though they can be applauded for insisting on rest as well as work, they demonstrate little grace in their observations and even less in their discussions on the topic. Regardless of the details, however, so many false ideas about work and rest are rampant in the surrounding culture that Christians need to be sure their thinking and behavior are in line with the truth of God's Word. And it will be difficult to think rightly about time and busyness if we do not think biblically about calling, work and rest.

IF TIME PERMITS . . .

In one of the classics of Puritan literature, Jeremiah Burroughs defines Christian contentment as "that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition."⁶ Though there is nothing in Scripture which suggests that efficiency and productivity—in their proper place and application—are contrary to godliness, surely the frenetic busyness that presses in on us is counter to nurturing contentment. So many parents keep so busy, for example, shuffling their children from one activity to

another (many of which are organized by the church), that this commitment soon feels oppressive. One scholar refers to this sort of thing as "anti-leisure." Duties may be assumed freely, but "undertaken compulsively, as a means to an end, for a perception of necessity, with a high degree of externally composed constraints, with considerable anxiety, with a high degree of time consciousness, with a minimum of personal autonomy."⁷ Just reading that definition is wearisome! But impressions aside, the more serious question is whether anti-leisure is not antithetical to contentment. Yet this plunge into endless rounds of activities for families seems to be simply taken for granted by many believers. And so the busyness expands, with minimal reflection and discernment.

To be discerning about the press of busyness requires a nuanced application of the truth of God's Word to a multifaceted and very human problem. That is the challenge, and with joy we can recognize that the biblical revelation of creation, fall, and redemption provides a balanced and powerful foundation for thinking clearly about busyness even though so many of us are so busy we imagine we don't have the time to consider it at all.

Author

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Notes

1. Leland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work and Leisure* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1995), 37.

2. Joanne Kaufman, "Being Busy," in *Allure* (May 1997), 134-138.
3. Ryken, op. cit., 38.
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1960) III, X, 6; 724.
5. *Foundations for Leadership* (Burke, Virginia: The Trinity Forum, 5210 Lyn-gate Court, Suite B, Burke, Virginia 22015; 1991, 1993, 1994), 1-3.
6. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust; 1648, reprint 1964), 19.
7. Ryken, op. cit., 60.