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It is our greatest asset and worst enemy. Time. We all feel it slipping away; we all feel its pressure. But David Andrew thinks we don't grasp the fact that the gospel of Jesus should change the way we understand time and how we use it.

Ancient man lived by the seasons. Modern man lives by the hours and seconds. We worship the athlete who takes milliseconds off world record 'times' and 'splits'. The world has shifted from being summoned by church bells to being 'watched' by the town hall clock. Nowadays we strap it onto our wrists and call it a 'watch', and spend the day watching the watch. As I type, my computer notifies me of the minutes left until certain meetings have to be attended. If I do not get to the meeting at the designated time, everybody will know I am 'late', even though I am still very much alive.

The dissection of time is not morally bad or good, any more or less than the invention of the printing press was bad or good. As with all of God's creation, it all depends on how you use it. Time can be used wisely, or it can be a tyrant. All of God's gifts carry an accountability to respond to the gift, and therein lies the work that can be either a joy or an overwhelming burden.

In this article, I look at how we can think about time as Christians and how to work out what to do with it.

Why did God Create Time?

It is now two thousand years back to the time of Christ. It is another two thousand years back to Abraham. God certainly takes a long time to keep his promises. Why didn't he just drop Jesus into the Garden of Eden before Genesis Chapter 4?

But God does not see time the same way we see it. Peter summarises:

...with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

(2 Peter 3: 8-9)

This passage tells us three things (at least):

- iv. 1. God takes a long view of time but every moment is important.
 - v. 2. Time is the arena in which God's promises are fulfilled.
 - vi. 3. This arena shows his kindness and patience to us, so we will believe the gospel and repent.
- viii. 1. God's long view of time

God takes a long view of time but God himself sits over time. God is not subject to time any more than he is subject to space, or chance or any other 'thing' or concept. Time is created, and like all of God's creation, it has 'form' as God 'forms' it. The 'form' of time is linear and purposeful. Time

is going somewhere – it is not circular as in Eastern and New Age thought, nor is time directionless. It is through time that history unfolds towards a given end. That is, the hours and days do not randomly appear with God wondering what he is going to do every day. Rather, God’s sovereign plan unfolds with every piece in place and all things and events in their allotted time. This goes for all of reality from the everyday (Ecc 3:1: “There is an appointed time for everything”) to the details of the divine plan for the redemption of the world in Christ.

This is why we must understand the Bible in terms of a long view of time. The Bible moves from Creation to New-Creation, and it is this movement from one state to the other that gives the context for everything that happens in the middle. Some Christians have removed Christ from this movement through time and reduced him to a talisman or a mantra to be chanted: “Jesus, Jesus, what can you do for me today?”. This magical view of Jesus is nothing short of blaspheming: it takes the Lord of all history’s name in vain.

The long view of the Bible is called ‘Biblical Theology’. We are to see the magnificence of Christ as not only the means to an end, but as the end... and the beginning! Christ was there at creation (Col 1:16), and there throughout the process (Col 1:17); he died and rose for his people, and then ascended to the right hand of God as the risen Lord (Eph 1:20-21). This panoramic view helps us understand the events of Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection. Anything less or different reduces the breadth and depth of the Bible’s message – and this is a reduction of Christ himself.

x. 2. Time as an arena for God’s promises

By understanding this biblical flow of time, it becomes clear that time is not an entity of value in itself. It is better thought of as an ‘arena’ because of the importance of what happens in the arena.

Within this arena, God relates to his creation. He exercises his plans and purposes for the world and its inhabitants. The purposes of God can be described as ‘relational’. The outcome of all of history is that we gather around the throne of Jesus as our kingly friend, with God as our father – not as our judge. God ‘manages’ his time in terms of relationships, not in terms of ‘time for its own sake’.

For Christians, this means that time is our friend, not our enemy. We are to manage our time in terms of the relationships we have and the relationships we want to have. This is what it means to ‘redeem the time’, to “teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps 90:12). In other words, the practice of time management is actually relationship management within the arena of time. But this does not mean lazing around having a string of aimless conversations and then calling them ‘pastoral work’. Rather, it is the nitty gritty of striving in relationships for the good of the other person.

All of life is relational – that is how God created it. Sometimes even the pagans see this: Marx rightly said that it is evil to reduce ‘production’ to a commodity fetish. Even our work on the factory floor is producing something for someone in a work relationship. Christians should be arguing for seeing life as a set of relationships to be brought under the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ – the prime relationship. Sadly, however, many Christians act no differently to anyone else in their management of time – they maximise the economic rather than the relational.

i. 3. God’s kindness and patience

God kindly steps from eternity into time and space to redeem mankind through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation is not an abstract concept but a real event. God's word interprets the event to us – his word comes before the event, during the event, and after the event. What we call the 'Old Testament' develops the picture of what the Christ will look like. When he arrives he is recognisable to those who have eyes to see. After the event further interpretation is given.

God did not give himself to us in a series of propositions in an abstract 'system' such as that constructed by 'systematic theology'. Rather, he gave himself to us in time. In the same way, growing in right relationships is a matter of putting truths in to practice, with the gathered hindsight of all the situations we have been through in our lives to date. It's about knowing and experiencing the truth with flesh on it. For this to happen, we need time – and God's interpretive word on the past, present and future.

So what do we do with Time?

What does this mean for Christians in their day-to-day lives? If God is like this, what does it mean to be 'Godly' in our use of time? Going back to our starting verses from Peter, we can do much the same thing as God, albeit on the finite human plane.

- ii. 1. Take a long view of time, but regard every moment as important

One of the world's foremost management theorists argues that leadership is (among other things) a matter of being able to take a longer view and then bring the view to pass. Steven Covey, another popular management guru, argues that we always should start "with the end in mind". They are both right. They have 'discovered' what has been in the Bible all along and what Jesus acted out: that you have to know where you are going to understand what to do now.

Jesus is single-minded in his journey to the cross. He knows where he is going and why he is going there. Around him, others are not clear, and their actions become confused and unfocused. Jesus determines his day-to-day actions in the light of the cross and the journey he must make. At the level of everyday conversations he can seem inconsistent, unless the cross is understood – hence the disciples continually arguing for a different course of action from the one Jesus undertakes.

Yet in Jesus' single-mindedness, he wholeheartedly cares for the people he is in relationship with – and there are thousands of them, including us 2000 years later. We are to do likewise. Sometimes making decisions this way is easy: Do I watch television or talk to my kids? Sometimes it is hard: Do I work two jobs so my wife can be home with the children or do we shift to a cheaper suburb? These and the hundreds of questions of everyday Christian life are to be worked out with both the long and short term in view. It is not easy! The way you relate now to your children forms a large part of where they will be 20 years down the track. But living as a Christian involves facing these decisions and making them with the end of time in view. The popular response to 'just trust God' and let what will happen, is often laziness masquerading as piety.

- iv. 2. Plan where you want relationships to head over time

The first step in managing time is not to buy a diary but to know the relationships you are in, the ones you are likely to be in, and the ones you want proactively to manage to have in the future. After that, you need to think about where you want the relationship to go – and, if you are a Christian, then the gospel is paramount.

However, this does not mean you go to work, walk into the office of an unconverted colleague, and preach at them. But it does not exclude it either! What it means is that you will think in terms of the parameters of the relationship itself: what is the relationship? How developed is the relationship? What is the right amount of time to put into this relationship? And this is all to be worked out in the light of all the other relationships you are involved in.

Ultimately the values you hold about relationships and the gospel will come to the surface. If you think meeting with God's people is important, but "we couldn't make it this week or last week because the cat died/ we are going to grannies/ the sports carnival is on, etc.," then others might be justified in questioning the value you place on relationships with other Christians. Ditto for the minister who turns up with a badly prepared sermon because he 'didn't have the time'.

Before we become judgmental, there may be good relational reasons for not turning up to church that week and there may be valid reasons for bad sermons – in the end it is your decision to make in the light of the gospel and the relationships you are in. If the reasons are legitimate, people will understand.

3. Be kind and patient

I am the most impatient person that has ever lived. I have painfully learnt to 'hold back' over the years as my impatience has borne not-so-sweet fruit. Just as God takes time with us, we are to take time with others. Time for them to grow, time for us to grow.

Be certain that no-one (including me and you) has got it all together with all the right doctrine, fully matured, right here and now. Our children do not go from nil to maturity over a weekend houseparty. Just as God shows kindness and patience with sin, so we too can 'hang back' for reflection and improvement. Sanctification comes over time – time is a friend for the Christian. Yes, the 'time is short'. But that does not mean we make it shorter by mishandling it!

The Christian life is one of disciplined discipleship. Discipline is much broader than the moralisms of a social gospel or the demands of a denomination. The Christian life is about relationships to be enjoyed and lived out in time and space. When God picks up my diary and reads it, what will he conclude about the people I held to be most important?

Conclusion

Everybody gets 24 hours a day and everybody has different abilities and different relational demands. The task of the Christian walk is demanding, exciting and threatening. It requires discipline across a whole range of areas. It requires encouragement from the fellowship and perseverance from the saints. Working it out with fear and trembling is the challenge that no-one can delegate or avoid.

A good beginning is to marvel at the way God set everything in place and in time for the purpose of reconciling all things in Christ. Knowing that, we are free to go forward confidently and 'have a go' at Christian living, as the Australian phrase so aptly puts it. But it is not an option not to engage in relationships. Such is the real, everyday challenge of life for the Christian.

Work is therefore not to be thought of as 'secular' or 'sacred', but as relational. The opposite of work is laziness, not unemployment. The idea of 'full time Christian ministry' is simply practical

and functional, not superior or more spiritual. People who are poor performers in their 'secular' work usually perform the same way in their 'Christian' work.

Elliot Jaques, Requisite Organisation, Carson Hall & Co, 1988.

Steven R. Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Simon & Schuster, 1990.

Sorry about the terribly mundane examples – but these are the real decisions we have to make!