

The Busy Pastor

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Lord, I have time

*And so all men run after time, Lord.
They pass through life running –
hurried, jostled, overburdened, frantic, and they never get there.
They haven't the time.
In spite of all their efforts they're still short of time,
of a great deal of time.*

*Lord, you must have made a mistake in your calculations.
There is a big mistake somewhere.
The hours are too short,
The days are too short,
Our lives are too short.¹*

I cannot count how many times over the last few months I have been asked: "How are you doing?" and responded I am very busy, there aren't enough hours in the day. Indeed, I am sure this has been the default response of many individuals as we have had to navigate the unexpected 2020 global pandemic Covid-19. Certainly, the sentiments in Michel Quoist's prayer *Lord, I have time*, quoted above, resonates. Throughout my life, despite my best intentions, I could most often be described as a busy Martha (Lk. 10:38-42) who looks on life's Marys with a slight pang of jealousy. In Western culture time is a precious resource, a desirable commodity which feels as limited as it is abundant.² Although there are 24 hours a day, there is always only 24 hours in a day. Today, a congregation may consider a busy pastor is a virtue, a badge of devotion for both their flock and servant hearted sacrifice.³ Conversely, Eugene Peterson describes the busy pastor as scandalous.⁴ This reflection will consider the paradigm of the busy pastor reflecting on time management and God's timing.

Time Management

Although, "busy" may be an appropriate description for the modern day pastor, it can be argued it is unflattering. Eugene Peterson attests 'the adjective busy set as a modifier to pastor should sound to our ears like adulterous ... or embezzling ... It is an outrageous scandal, a blasphemous affront.'⁵ And so Peterson highlights two reasons for becoming busy: vanity and laziness.⁶ Being busy, Peterson posits, means you appear important and are significant; It means you allow other people to dictate your agenda, often filled with actions that are not essential to the pastor's vocation.

During unexpected times it can be easy to defend the ever growing fragmented todo list. It seems the role, and tasks, of the pastor are increasingly broadening including a large diversity of ministries such as

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1. M. Quoist, *Prayers [Kindle Edition]* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 1999), 95.
 2. E. R. Richards & B. J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders To Better Understand The Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2012), 127.
 3. E. H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 17.
 4. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 17.
 5. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 17.
 6. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 18-19.

teaching pastor, chaplain, community pastor, missional pastor and youth pastor amongst others.¹ Such diversifying has led to the rise of team ministries, however, not every community has the resources to support a team ministry.² There is a risk that a pastor may try, and ultimately fail, to accommodate all the ever growing recognised multifaceted responsibilities of ministry. Without elucidation of the pastor's responsibilities, the various demands on ministry may create a very fragmented, and often competitive, approach to task and time management.

David Ford describes the fragmented, and competitive, rhythms of time as the symptom of a "culture of distraction", a mix of conflicting demands that dissipate time into many directions.³ Worryingly, this culture of distraction appears to be a fertile breeding ground for anxious overachievers. Kristen Lee has identified a rising trend of anxious overachievers, who experience a perpetual sense of urgency.⁴ The satisfaction of ticking off tasks can be a source of comfort against the threat of anxiety which is lurking beneath the fear of loss of control. I readily admit a key indicator of anxiety in my life is when I am excessively busy with no time, or so it seems, to breathe let alone gather my thoughts. However, Peterson argues that distractions and conflicting demands only lead to neglect of what is important:

*How can I lead people into the quiet place beside the still waters if I am in perpetual motion? How can I persuade a person to live by faith and not by works if I have to juggle my schedule constantly to make everything fit into place?*⁵

God's Timing

Scripture alerts us to be mindful of making the most of the time that the Lord has given us so we may be wise with it and understand His will (Ep. 5:15-17; Col. 4:5). Today we commonly ask, what is the time? The biblical writers are more concerned with the question, What time is it?⁶ As Western society lives in a relentless cascading of time, moving in synchronicity with it, the people of the Scriptures seem to live their lives free of its constraints. The biblical writers are less concerned with time's quantitative (measurable) aspect than its qualitative aspect (the occurrence of something important).⁷ Both aspects of time are revealed in the two Greek words for time - *chronos* and *kairos*.⁸ *Chronos* refers to what time it is chronologically, that is, discrete units of measurable time. *Kairos* refers to a time of opportunity.

Kairos is used frequently - almost twice as much as *chronos* - in the New Testament, both often translated as time. The Western tendency to interpret time chronologically means that when reading Scripture there is a tendency to miss *kairos* and so potentially misinterpret the writer's intent. Take the following examples:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time [kairos], because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is (Ep. 5:15-17)

Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the most of the time [kairos] (Col. 4:5)

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1. Eguizabal, O. & Lawson, K. E., 'Leading ministry teams, part I: Theological reflection on ministry teams', *Christian Education Journal* 2/6 (2009), 251.
 2. Eguizabal & Lawson, *Leading ministry teams*, 252.
 3. D. F. Ford, *The Shape of Living* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 130f.
 4. K. Lee, 'Are You a Healthy Achiever or Anxious Overachiever' (2019) <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/rethink-your-way-the-good-life/201901/are-you-healthy-achiever-or-anxious-overachiever>
 5. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 19.
 6. Perry, E., 'The Biblical Viewpoint', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 2/27 (1959), 127.
 7. Richards & O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes*, 142.
 8. Smith, J. E., 'Time, Times, and The 'Right Time': Chronos and Kairos', *The Monist* (1969), 1.

A chronological understanding of time may miss that these passages are talking about making the most of every God given opportunity. In other words, one must be both prepared and present at all times, in anticipation of a God moment, to act in the Lord's will. Perry writes:

It is man's responsibility to recognize the "signs" of the times when they appear and to assume responsibility accordingly. On every page of the New Testament, in fact, it is expected of man that he know what time it is now.¹

Critical to *kairos* is anticipating the right time for something to happen (not anytime); it means that a series of events have presented an opportunity, or turning point, requiring a response; it means that there is a critical concept of time within which a response can be made.² Distinctive to the biblical character of *kairos* is that God alone sets, or appoints, the time according to his plan (Acts 1:7; Mark 13:32). Perry observes:

This is the time of which Jesus spoke in Galilee, the time of the fulfillment of God's plan to redeem the times. Jesus' own kairos, the time of his Passion, is different from other kairoi because it is a special event in God's plan of salvation. These events by which God consummates his plan of salvation provided the biblical writers their unique answer to the question, What time is it?³

Being alert to opportunities is trusting God is active in his creation.⁴ The rhetoric of a busy pastor betrays a belief that managing their *chronos* is more important than discerning God's *kairos*. Rather, perhaps a pastor's time (*chronos*) would better be spent asking God the question: what time is it? I would suggest that during the present pandemic, a potential global turning-point, asking God "what time is it" is of utmost importance.

Looking ahead

Eugene Peterson highlights three fundamentals, even essentials, of a pastor: praying, speaking the word of God and listening.⁵ Common to each of these fundamentals are making time (*chronos*) to be sensitive to God's timing (*kairos*). I can be a pastor who prays, who is awake to the opportunities God is presenting in the life of his church. I can be a pastor who immerses myself in God's word, who wrestles with it (Gen. 32:22-32), so God's word, in all its authority, can be heard and responded to today. I can be a pastor who actively listens to how God is working in people's lives and the community. I cannot pray if I am busy. I cannot speak the word of God authentically if I am busy. I cannot listen if I am busy. Managing time (*chronos*) to be receptive to God's timing (*kairos*) is a fundamental, even essential, character of being a pastor. The next time I am asked "how am I doing?" I hope to respond, in truth, trying my best to not be too busy so I can be open to the opportunities God is presenting.

Lord, I have time

*I am not asking you tonight, Lord, for time to do this and then that,
But your grace to do conscientiously, in the time that you give me,
what you want me to do.⁶*

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1. Perry, *The Biblical Viewpoint*, 130.
 2. Smith, *Time, Times, and The 'Right Time': Chronos and Kairos*, 6.
 3. Perry, *The Biblical Viewpoint*, 129.
 4. Ford, *The Shape of Living*, 133.
 5. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 19-21.
 6. Quoist, *Prayers*, 97.

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