

## **It's about Time: Practices of Rest and Worship in Church and Culture**

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At this institute on “Worship, Culture, and Catholicity: Remembering the Future” I may focus a little more on culture than have the other speakers, a choice perhaps appropriate for a church historian and student of American religious life. Let me begin, therefore, with a statement from an anthropologist: “Time talks,” says Edward T. Hall in his book *The Silent Language*. “It speaks more plainly than words. The message it conveys comes through loud and clear. Because it is manipulated less consciously, it is subject to less distortion than the spoken language. It can shout the truth where words lie.”<sup>2</sup>

Christians should be intrigued by this declaration of a connection between time and truth, for we know that living in time belongs to our identity as created beings and as children of God. “Mysticism has no interest in time,” Alexander Schmemmann has written.<sup>3</sup> But of course, Christianity as a whole does. That is especially clear after our three days of conversation about eschatology as a remembering of the future, but other doctrines embrace time as well.

Christian faith has every interest in time. It is even able to shout the truth through the way it orders time. Yet within the time-driven culture of North America, I wonder whether the church is engaging in its practices of ordering time as plainly and effectively as it can and should be doing. For so many people today time—the experience of moving through actual days, weeks, years—is not shaped by hope but rather encountered as burden, blur, or bane. This is a fact of great pastoral moment, a matter of great significance for how we understand God, the world, and ourselves, and how we live faithful lives.

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<sup>1</sup>Many of the ideas in this lecture were later developed by the author in Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 51.

We live in a society where time is out of whack. Somehow, although we've been taught that we should use time well, it now feels to many people like time is using them. Salaried professionals are pressured (and learn to pressure themselves) to give their all and more, while wage earners are lured or forced into long hours of overtime work. Those with children hope against hope to fulfill their parental duties in small amounts of "quality time" and often feel overcome by the demands of parenting, housework, and paid work. Even leisure is something we are now expected to do strenuously, working out harder (an interesting phrase for a leisure activity) and vacationing more extravagantly. We live in "an economy and society that are demanding too much from people," says Juliet Schor in her book *The Overworked American*.<sup>4</sup>

Schor argued most Americans work at home and for pay significantly longer hours than their parents did. She persuaded me, a member of her demographic focus group as a middle-class working parent. A different team of sociologists—remembering how hard people worked in generations past—has since challenged her analysis, but their image of how Americans feel about their time and how it gets spent is no prettier than Schor's. Americans in most circumstances have more "free" time each week than their parents and grandparents did, say John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey. But they do not experience that time as freedom. Almost all of the extra goes to watching TV, and when the set goes off, this segment of the population feels just as buffeted about by the demands of life as do those who never had a moment to turn the TV on in the first place. "Our extra 'free time' has arrived (and then disappeared) in tiny packets scattered across the work week—long enough to channel-surf but not enough for deep relaxation and leisure of the sort that we do enjoy during vacations, and not enough for social intimacy and civic engagement, both of which are declining," comments Robert Putnam in summarizing these findings.<sup>5</sup> If Schor's image is of the "overworked American," we might call this image "the distracted American."

A third image, sadly, must be of "the underworked American." Overwork is not well distributed—which, of course, is part of the problem. Segregations of class and age erode the worth and usefulness of too many

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<sup>4</sup>Juliet Schor, *The Overworked America: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), xv.

<sup>5</sup>Robert D. Putnam, "Foreword," in John P. Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey, *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), xvii.

people, leaving them with time hanging heavy on their hands. The economy and society that expect too much of some people offer empty hours to others, throughout the life cycle or perhaps during its later stages, in long years of unnecessarily isolated retirement.

Every congregation includes some overworked Americans (often including its clergy, musicians, educators, and most active lay members); some underworked Americans (the unemployed or the elderly); and a great many distracted Americans. Time is a problem they all bring to worship with them—or don't, having decided that they have no time for worship this week, or this year, or longer. And so time is a very practical problem for those who wish to strengthen the life and worship of the church. Let me offer three snapshots:

One Monday morning, a pastor got a phone call asking her to check the pews for someone's mislaid gloves. She found the gloves. She also found the previous day's bulletin, marked in pew pencil to show the exact number of minutes and seconds occupied by each element of the worship service. Opening hymn, 3:38. Old Testament reading, 2:32. You get the idea.

A recent seminary class was assigned to read with care a year's worth of newsletters from a church in Pennsylvania. One perceptive student noticed time was determinative of the life of this community. "Church activities or events were never understood to have a self-justifying claim on one's time," he reported. "There were numerous and constant reminders that one's time would be well spent and no more time than was absolutely necessary would be required. There was a common sense that time was a commodity to be spent wisely."

Among the market-driven alterations of language at Willow Creek Church is the identification of Lord's Day worship as "the weekend service." This service is not exceptionally short, but those who craft it are intensely attuned to issues of pace and flow as they seek to reach distracted Americans. Many other churches—not necessarily megachurches by any stretch of the imagination—are also caught up in waves of temporal experimentation around the Sunday service. Should it be shorter, later, earlier, quicker?

Individuals crushed under the burden of time, or simply confused by its chaos, sometimes think just the right scheduling software, or the latest version of DayTimers, might ease their pain. Similarly, congregations might be tempted to think scheduling worship for precisely the most opportune hours will ease theirs. But such measures are stopgaps, or worse. It is time to grapple with the problem of time more directly. This

problem has received significant attention from time-management experts, sociologists, economists, and health-care experts; but we have barely begun to explore it as a spiritual and theological issue. This morning I want to suggest that we step back to consider the larger theological and cultural issues implicated in the contemporary experience of the problem of time.

I intend to do this in three steps. First, I'll explore the shape of time in history and culture and consider what its silent language says theologically. Second, I'll argue that the contemporary world can find great help in Christian practices of ordering time. Finally, I'll make a few preliminary suggestions about how the vigor and accessibility of these practices might be enhanced in Christian worship and life today.

### *The Shape of Time in History and Culture*

Two illustrations—one from 1726, one from 1997—will get us started on this exploration of time, faith, and culture. The first is from Jonathan Swift's best-known novel. Gulliver is in Lilliput, and the tiny citizens are puzzled. What is the nature of the big engine that hangs from a silver chain at Gulliver's waist and makes incessant noise? "We conjecture," they report, "it is either some unknown Animal, or the God that he worships ... But we are more inclined to the latter Opinion, because he assured us that he seldom did any Thing without consulting it ... and said it pointed out the Time for every Action of his Life."<sup>6</sup>

We laugh, considering our own watches—now strapped to our bodies, not simply placed in our pockets. But consider that in 1726, the clock was playing an indispensable role in ushering in modern industrial society. Synchronized time makes technological and commercial development possible. It also detaches time telling from natural rhythms, socially organizing it for the sake of productivity and elevating efficiency as a norm in human work and relations.<sup>7</sup> Clocks symbolized, and made possible, the rationality and order upon which modern society rested. And they gave great force to the new saying, "Time is money." They would, in effect, alter the West's way of life—speeding up its pace and tempo, subordinating nature, family, and community to what seemed to be

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<sup>6</sup>Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, Norton Critical Editions (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961), 18.

<sup>7</sup>See Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1934), 12-18.

imperatives of efficiency and production, and fostering an antipathy to feast and festival among people like Ebenezer Scrooge (at least until they figured out a way to make holidays good, not bad, for business).<sup>8</sup> Preindustrial society had far more appreciation of feast and festival—whether holy or profane—and their sense of time and what it was for was a big reason for this.

But back now to Gulliver. What about the idea that his clock was not just a tool but a god? The Lilliputians were perceptive. Gulliver's clock linked him to a whole world of activity, and in doing so it exercised a certain kind of ultimate power. When moderns spoke of "saving time," were they (are we) using a banking metaphor or a religious one? Keeping the emblem of the impersonal, unnatural time system of commercial, industrial society strapped to one's body is a form of acquiescence to its power to shape personal identity and, indeed, a way of life.

One more twist of history also suggests the Lilliputians were astute to note the theological resonance of the clock. Monasteries, it so happens, were deeply implicated in the development of timekeeping devices. Because Benedictine monks were committed to praying at set "hours" during the course of each day, discovering a way to call the community to prayer was crucial to their way of life. Their hour-consciousness made it possible for them to unite their voices in a constant prayer on behalf of the world. Thus being "on time" mattered deeply—though in a different sense than it matters to moderns.<sup>9</sup> Their timeliness was framed by beliefs that gave a certain kind of meaning to the ringing of the hours, and the bells tolled within an ethos of awe regarding the eternity of God and the shortness of the human span. Industrial capitalism, in contrast, kept the hours but discarded the ethos. Indeed, it specifically refused to look eternity and mortality in the face. These two ultimate contexts of human labor were almost deliberately denied, swept out of mind as the linear sequence of productive hourly units rolled on at each factory or commercial establishment.

The second image is much more recent. It is from *Time* magazine's 1997 cover story on Bill Gates. The reporter is describing the computer mogul's wife, Melinda, and the family life they are beginning to build.

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<sup>8</sup>See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup>Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 12–18.

Melinda is Catholic, goes to church and wants to raise Jennifer that way. "But she offered me a deal," Gates says. "If I start going to church—my family was Congregationalist—then Jennifer could be raised in whatever religion I choose." Gates admits that he is tempted, because he would prefer she have a religion that has less theology and all than Catholicism, but he has not yet taken up the offer. "Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient," he explains. "There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning."<sup>10</sup>

Gates's comment discloses a relationship to time that echoes the themes we encountered in the 1726 example and shows their continuing weight: commercial success means keeping an eye on the clock. But is Gates consulting a pocket watch as he considers the efficient use of time? No, he is not. His time is digital time, and his temporal referent is the always-open marketplace of the World Wide Web, where the natural and even the social-conventional rhythms by which humankind has long marked time have become irrelevant. On the Web, day and night mean nothing—not to mention Sunday and Monday or winter and summer.

This arrangement of time is taking hold not only among the technological elite, but very widely indeed, as the United States moves steadily toward a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week economy. All prospects are that the demands on people's time can only get worse—and that the time there is seems likely to come to us in fragments fit for channel-surfing. It is not the lack of time but rather its formlessness that is troubling in this scenario. One can imagine human lives ever more fully detached from nature, from the shared life of human community, and from a sense of belonging to a story longer than one's own span of years. How does one remember the future when living by a digital clock?

The poet Noelle Oxenhandler recently offered an image that suggests how this pattern of time—this 24/7, as young people like to call it—can profoundly misshape our assessments of who we are. Every town has two institutions lit by what Oxenhandler calls "the same shrill, twenty-four-hour light, the doors that never shut, the windowless air, and a counter or front desk manned by the same rotation of pale clerks with their free-floating body clocks." The two are the 7-Eleven and the emergency room.

What does it mean that the 7-Eleven and the emergency room are atmospherically similar? The emergency room is the true domain of necessity, the place where there is no drawing back before the bleeding wound, the broken bone, the last-minute contractions. But a Pop-Tart, a six-pack of Coke in the middle of the night? We have come to believe that convenience is necessity. What begins as slogan, words

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<sup>10</sup>Walter Isaacson, "In Search of the Real Bill Gates," *Time*, 13 January 1997, 51.

sprayed on the surface of things—billboards, labels, magazines—becomes visceral, and if we can't find it we feel a knot of anxiety, frustration. We are thrown back on a world that has its own rhythms, that doesn't immediately bend to meet our yen to eat a candy bar or have a shirt pressed—or even our more serious needs.... Our own definition of a world in order is one in which all goods and services are always immediately available. This is the paradisiacal aspect of the mall, and it is our version of eternity: seasonless, ever-present, abundant.<sup>11</sup>

This meditation lays bare the bad eschatology of consumerism. Christian faith has a better future to remember, a truer sense of what people really need, and a more nuanced set of rhythms to pattern its days and nights.

How time is organized is a fundamental building block of any way of life. Because coordinated timing enables people to do things together, it is an indispensable basis of community and shared purpose. Moreover, how we live with the rhythms of day, week, and year says a great deal about who we think we are and what we take our deepest needs to be. So thinking about the patterns of time makes us ponder our whole way of life.

At the simplest level, the problem is knowing, in body mind and soul, what time it is. After all, we don't want to miss anything really important. When she was three or four, my little girl looked up from her cereal one morning and asked, "Mommy, what time is it?" "It's morning time," I told her. She looked puzzled, so I tried again. "Seven o'clock. Wake up time. Breakfast time." "No, no, no," she said. "Christmas all finished, Halloween all finished, Valentine all finished. What *time* is it?"

It will take some time—years, in fact—to think through all the issues raised by the changing patterns by which people in our culture know what time it is. But this thinking does not need to begin from scratch. As even my little daughter sensed, Christian people have been thinking for many centuries about the shape of time as we live it from day to day, from week to week, and from year to year. And we have been living out answers to fundamental human questions about time as well.

This thinking that the church has been doing—this way of life that knows what time it is—derives not only from doctrines and texts. Rather, it is most formatively embedded in and embodied in "practices." By practices I mean the *things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs, in response to and in the light of*

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<sup>11</sup>Noelle Oxenhandler, "Fall from Grace," *The New Yorker*, 16 June 1997, 68.

*God's active presence for the life of the world.*<sup>12</sup> Practices are thought-filled social activities that arise out of living traditions; they have histories and have taken numerous forms in the past and in various cultures around the world; they will continue into the future as they take on concrete, specific forms in the unique circumstances of the present. We learn practices with and from other people. Participation in them shapes the people who do them, as individuals and as communities, into people who do fundamental human things in ways that are marked by Christian faith: offering hospitality in certain ways, or forgiving one another through certain words and gestures and in a certain kind of confidence, or caring for the sick and dying in a certain way.

There is a Christian practice of keeping time—or perhaps a cluster of practices—that help us to know what time it is, why it matters, and what we would miss if we lost track of time. This cluster of practices is an indispensable part of a constellation of practices that add up to a faithful way of life. Those of you who care for the liturgical traditions of the church have special and intimate familiarity with these practices, as they are distilled in worship. Your living knowledge about what time it is is sorely needed by a culture that feels itself increasingly swept along on time's surface.

### *Christian Practices of Ordering Time*

Three temporal spans focus the Christian practice of keeping time: the week, the year, and the day.

*The Week.* Marva Dawn mentioned that I would probably talk about keeping sabbath, and she was right. She and I share a passion for this practice, and I have learned much from her about it.<sup>13</sup> About a year ago I wrote an essay advocating the keeping of sabbath that was published in *Practicing Our Faith* and reprinted in a few magazines, and I learned a great deal from the responses it evoked. The yearning for real rest, for joyful feasting, for disengagement from the world of work and worry and commerce—the yearning for sabbath—is widespread and deep. But many,

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<sup>12</sup>This understanding of practices is developed in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

<sup>13</sup>Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).



many yearners are also quite doubtful that they can or will allow themselves to receive the gift of this day.

This practice arose within and continues as a vital and definitive practice within Judaism, from which we Christians have much to learn. In somewhat different form, this practice also offers to Christians a set of activities done together week after week, century after century, that affirms some of our deepest convictions and involves us in the life of God. Complex historical developments have led most churches during the past sixteen centuries to absorb the keeping of the sabbath into the celebration of the Lord's Day; I have continued in this tradition (though some questions linger for me about this). In sabbath, Christians find not a law obedience to which will redeem us, but rather an ancient and ongoing practice that guides us into a way of life that discloses God's intentions for humanity and creation. Note the beliefs that are embedded and embodied in this practice:

- Resting and worshiping on one day in seven affirms that God, not we, created the world. Keeping sabbath, we coexist in gratitude for and with one another and the natural world as gifts of God.
- Resting and worshiping on one day in seven, we affirm that God led the people of Israel out of bondage, and we express with our bodies and lives that God does not intend unremitting labor for any one—not for us, not for those who might serve us, not even for animals.
- The eschatological extension of sabbath from the seventh to the first or eighth day of the week enables us to celebrate together, as Christians have done every first day since Easter itself, God's victory over death and the breaking into history of the new creation.

A sabbath lasts all day, not just for an hour or two of corporate worship. In the practice of keeping sabbath, concrete activities (or should I say non-activities) guide us into a faithful way of life: we practice stepping off the treadmill of work and spend; we develop the capacity to disengage from consumer culture and to coexist in gratitude with nature and other people within the plenty of God's creation; we live now on the eighth day, the day of remembering the future. The practice does not consist of following an unbending set of rules; within Judaism, for example, there have been centuries of debate about precisely what it means not to work. We need to have a similar (but different) realistic debate among Christians who wish to explore this practice today. For example, Jürgen Moltmann, noting the ecological significance of sabbath at the end of his book *God in Creation*, suggests that we resolve not to drive our cars

on that day!<sup>14</sup> It's in the conversations that follow suggestions like this the rubber hits the road, as it were. For me, this proposal seems too hard; but I have found relinquishing the use of money and absenting myself from the marketplace on Sunday to be tremendously relevant and liberating.

Figuring out who to engage in this practice with the full community of Christians will introduce new dimensions of difficulty—particularly as we try to extend it to include those whose economic choices are truly limited, and to those of certain vocations, including those who serve the church professionally. Inventiveness will be required. So will close attention to the economic stresses that already, without our attending to them, fracture the church's people one from another, and this attention will be a good thing indeed. People who know the sabbath pattern of creation, liberation, and resurrection will learn to nurture a dissatisfaction with an economic system that denies freedom for low-wage workers in this and other aspects of life. Keeping sabbath, we grow in our longing for a system where all people have work at a living wage, and time for rest and worship, too. Sabbath is, in this sense and others, an issue of justice. Within the present economics of time, this transformative sense of sabbath is missing. Indeed, many people seem to acquiesce in the secular economy of time, while hoping to save up all their sabbaths for the end of life—an uncertain strategy at best, and clearly a distortion of God's intentions for our time.

*The Year.* It is neither necessary nor possible for me to instruct this audience about the beauty and formative power of the liturgical year. Not only would this be carrying coals to Newcastle, it would also be presumptuous, as I am a greater novice in this than in the other aspects of Christian timekeeping, coming as I do from the Reformed tradition and, indeed, from its free-church wing. Perhaps, though, you will suffer my newcomer's testimony about how deeply moving and instructive I have found it to live within these seasons since I married into Lutheranism fifteen years ago. The patterns of the year connect the *now*—the vulnerable present in which I myself, mortal, live—to the great acts of God and to the future God has promised and prepared, a future already breaking in upon us. The history of our redemption and the future glory of which we are assured become immediate and present. I need hardly say the point is not simply to give form to time in a culture where there is none: the point is to give to the actual days real people live the kind of form that will transform them into loving and joyful children of God. Prosper

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<sup>14</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 296.

Gueranger put this very eloquently (if a little quaintly) more than a century ago:

There is not a single point of Christian doctrine which, in the course of the liturgical year, is not brought forward, nay, is not inculcated with that authority and unction wherewith the church has so deeply impregnated its words and its eloquent rites. The faith of the believer is thus enlightened more and more each year; the theological *sensus* is formed in us; prayer leads us to science. Mysteries continue to be mysteries; but their brightness becomes so vivid, that the mind and heart are enchanted, and we begin to imagine what a joy the eternal sight of these divine beauties will produce in us, when the glimpse of them through the clouds is such a charm to us.<sup>15</sup>

You know all this much better than I do. As a novice in this worship and in this field, I relied on this quotation, unsure as yet that I've got my own liturgical theology quite right. But I'm practicing—much as a child practices a new instrument. And I suspect that others would do so too, if invited in and shown how to hold the instrument, where to find the music, and how to count out the measures. Those of you who craft the colors and pitch the tones that permit the people of God to experience the liturgical year should not underestimate how powerful this can be in giving meaningful and transformative form to time. Nor should you underestimate how mystifying it can be to those less familiar than you are with its rhythms. Teach the people, please.

Today there are traditions of Advent and Lent growing up in churches that did not acknowledge even Christmas and Easter two centuries ago. These quiet seasons probably caught on first among Americans of the Reformed tradition because they gave us a new perspective on our gluttonous culture and on our own participation in it. Practiced again and again, however, other deeper dimensions of the redemptive and eschatological meaning of these seasons are also becoming accessible to these new practitioners.

*The Day.* Days, in a sense, keep us humble. They come one at a time, and they require of us the vulnerability of sleep. Biblical (and subsequently, liturgical) days insist on being encountered as gifts from God and harbingers of eternity. In their presence, the glowing digits on a computer screen—detached from nature and oriented toward productivity—become as naught. As anyone who has listened closely to

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<sup>15</sup>Prosper Gueranger, *The Liturgical Year* (New York: Newman Press, 1948), excerpted in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy*, ed. Gabe Huck (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 124.

Genesis 1 will know, such days do not begin when the alarm clock blares and end as we doze off, exhausted, with David Letterman. They begin and end at dusk. The first half of the day, in other words, passes in darkness. God is out growing the crops even before the farmer is up, and knitting together the wound before the clinic opens; human work joins in on a process that is already taking place without us, thank you very much. “When I quit my day’s work, nothing essential stops,” Eugene Peterson says. “I go to sleep to get out of the way for awhile. I get into the rhythm of salvation... Human effort is honored and respected not as a thing in itself but by its integration into the rhythms of grace and blessing.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps in the emerging time system of the global marketplace dusk will be difficult to discern. But the larger idea is an important one: a day of twenty-four hours that includes some human sleep and that conceives of our waking up as a joining in rather than a getting started. Gift comes each day, and not just task.

Much of the Christian practice of ordering the time of day derives from monastic practice, and in particular from the liturgy of the hours. Most of us are not monastics, but the humble forms of personal and domestic prayer, as they have taken shape in many humble lives over the generations, also set boundaries around each day. The little hours of popular devotions that have become traditional—morning praise and reading, mealtime blessing, bedtime prayer—are far more mighty than they might seem. “Come Lord Jesus” is an eschatological prayer. So is one verse of my own favorite bedtime prayer, “Teach me to live that I may dread the grave as little as my bed; teach me to die that so I may rise glorious in that awesome day.” Personal and domestic worship can be beleaguered by rote recitation, by sleepiness, and by poor attendance, but so can be the grander occasions of Christian worship. These practices form believers in a timely manner nonetheless, sowing the kind of alertness to God’s presence and the needs of the world that bears fruit throughout the day.

Contrasting any of these beautiful and profound practices of timekeeping with Gulliver’s watch, Bill Gates’s digital display, or an all-night 7-Eleven, it is tempting to pat ourselves on our collective back and say, “we Christians live on a different clock and calendar than everyone else, thank God.” And we do. But it is also obvious that almost all of us live tangled up in cultural time as well as in church time, daily, weekly,

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<sup>16</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 69. This book also describes Peterson’s way of claiming a sabbath while serving a church as a pastor.

and yearly. As in every practice that makes up a way of life, church and culture mix as people move through time. And thus an array of possibilities confronts thoughtful Christians who seek to live more faithfully. We could turn sectarian (or monastic) and resolve to keep sabbath stringently, to disregard all ways of shaping the year but the liturgical way, and to allow nothing to keep us from a set pattern of daily prayer. Yet a legalistic approach would trap us in a distorted notion of the Christian life, and it would hardly help us to offer to the culture the guidance it so urgently needs in this matter of living in time. So instead we could accommodate, offering abbreviated drive-in worship services in venues located for convenient access to after-church shopping and trying to make sure that church activities take as little time as possible. That doesn't seem like much help either.

Discerning the shape of the Christian practice of ordering time is something that needs to be done as each local congregation or family or other institution plumbs the riches of the tradition for the sake of its embodiment in a particular place. What distortions of these practices as we understand them biblically, historically, and theologically should we resist first, and why? When the 24/7 consumer culture pushes on the practices of the church, where and how should the church push back? What is sensible and unavoidable participation in one's milieu and what is an accommodation to it that contradicts basic affirmations of faith? These are questions that need to be explored in a wide range of different locations. But it would be wrong for me to conclude without suggesting a few guidelines for a contemporary strengthening of the Christian practices of ordering time.

#### *Strengthening the Christian Practices of Ordering Time*

First of all, articulate and help believers to articulate the pain of time as burden, blur, or bane. Do this in words, in pastoral contacts, in meetings to plan church programs and elsewhere. Simultaneously articulate, make visible and tangible, the truth-filled practices of ordering time God has given to the church. Covering up the pain can only lead to accommodation. If the church is to greet the seeking of our contemporaries with gifts that have substance (and some of those who are seeking are lifelong churchgoers who haven't fully "got it" yet), a clear articulation of the practices that are already present in living communities of faith must be set forth. People like yourselves need not only to do well what you do within the chancel (though of course that is vital,

indispensable), you also need to stand at the church door and say to those outside, “You see, this is what is going on in here, and this is why it matters beyond this building.” And you need to say the same thing to many of the people who are inside, by showing them how gathering on Sunday, or observing Lent, or saying table prayers, involve them in God’s active presence for the life of the world. An example of such teaching comes from some of the great Hispanic cathedrals in America’s cities, where worshipers spill out of their sanctuaries into the streets for celebrations of *Las Posadas* or processions on Good Friday.

Second, time’s passage causes pain (and for many this pain sets in at fifty-nine and a half minutes by the clock). But if this pain has been made articulate and identified as a focus of transformation in the gospel, perhaps worshipping communities can begin to explore the mysteries of *event time*. (Anthropologists speak of the difference between clock time and event time, whose duration is determined by the flow of what is happening, not by a separate mechanism.<sup>17</sup>) What would happen if we took off our watches during worship services? As an act of deliberate cross-cultural exploration, could congregations build up to letting worship take the time it needs, that which is intrinsic to its work, while explicitly identifying this approach as a much-needed gift in the present cultural context? From my vantage point in the pew, it has seemed to me the Easter Vigil shows people are willing to abandon the clock once in a while (though I fear as the Easter Vigil grows in popularity and becomes an expected, regular part of more people’s worship life, it may also be accommodating to clock time). It is important to note as well that worshipping on event time does not necessarily mean worshipping for a *long* time. Some services by their nature are short and violate their own rhythm when they drag on.

Third, honor the place of the humble worship of personal and family devotions as part of the Christian practice of remembering the future, of ordering time, and of resisting conformity to consumer culture, 24/7, and other contemporary and ancient varieties of sin. Good resources are available for strengthening family devotions across the seasons, and these can be helpful. But the simpler patterns in which many families already engage—table and bedtime prayers—also deserve nurture and esteem.

Fourth, find ways, as church, to help one another to keep the sabbath. I urge you to consult my essay in *Practicing Our Faith* and Marva Dawn’s *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* for ideas about how to do so. But there is one worth emphasizing in this audience. When Exodus 20:8-11

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<sup>17</sup>Robert Levine, *A Geography of Time* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 81ff.

appeared in the lectionary last year, a friend told me of her pastor's response: "The sermon will be short today, because the annual business meeting will take place after worship," he said as he launched into a conventional argument that it is important to go to church. The meeting, my friend reported, was lengthy and contentious. Christian appropriation of sabbath is different from that of the Jewish people, but we can gain from the Old Testament and the people who have lived with it longest and most intimately some helpful images of how a day that embodies a profound theology of creation and liberation can be shaped. Here is one: the sabbath is not a day for using money, for making lists, or for worrying about the work and provisions of the morrow. We should not have church business meetings after services on Sundays. As church, we need to say to one another that God intends freedom for you—something some of the most active members and faithful leaders especially need to hear.

Fifth, we must help believers (and through them society) to reframe the troubled conversation about time from a conversation whose language is managerial and therapeutic to a conversation that speaks of meaning and gift. I have heard the organization of Steven Covey, a Mormon, has a traveling workshop on time management tailored for use in churches; what everyone needs, Covey says, is a "mission statement." Corporate and theological language become unhelpfully confused in this rendering. In other contexts therapeutic language engenders conceptual confusion of another sort: individualized bits of "sabbath" (little breaks for refreshment) are promoted as "something I do for myself." Both approaches are a far cry from a biblical notion of sabbath as intimately bound up with the good of all creation, with sabbath as resistance to slavery, with sabbath eschatologically extended to Sunday as a cosmic victory over death. The point is not just to take a break. The point is to be changed. Similarly, the point of the yearly rhythm of feast and fast is not simply comfort and delight, and the point of evening prayer is not to find an easier way to get your five-year-old to sleep. The point is to be changed. The point is to encounter the content each practice of timekeeping bears. Christian practices of ordering time do not offer balance and self-fulfillment; instead, they foster a difference that permits faithful people to practice disengaging from the marketplace once a week, so they can disengage in other times and ways when that becomes important. These practices foster the capacity of distracted people to give their whole attention to the Word and the meal. These practices stretch their capacity to understand themselves and the world as belonging not to Father Time with his pocket watch or digital readout, but to God, the Creator and Lord of all that is.

Sixth, since the practice of ordering time is just one practice within the constellation that comprises a faithful way of life, its practitioners should also be alert to the question of how the shape of this practice sustains our capacity to engage in other practices. How does the way we practice sabbath form us in care for the creation, opposition to slavery, and trust in God's abundance? As Abraham Joshua Heschel has written, "The Sabbath cannot survive in exile, a lonely stranger among days of profanity."<sup>18</sup> How does the way we practice Advent prepare us to welcome the refugee for whom there is no room in the inns of the world? How do we grow in love and forgiveness for one another when we receive absolution and a mandate on Maundy Thursday? How does a family's table prayer prepare it to perceive Christ in one another and to be Christ to one another and to a world hungry for food and justice?

Finally, as with every practice of Christian life, what is most needed is grass-roots ministry that brings the best of our tradition into living reality in very particular places, each place unique in culture, class, history, and ethos. I will conclude with a sentence in which Gerard Sloyan expressed this well, a sentence that serves not only as conclusion but also as charge: "The basic requirement for any such ingenious approach to Christian life is that a few people everywhere, in every congregation and diocese and district, live a life alerted to the importance of time—not just to the passage or the ineluctability of time, but to its rhythms, its human seasons, its potential to destroy and to save."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath, Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1952), 89.

<sup>19</sup>Gerard S. Sloyan, "The Bible and Christian Prayer," in *Liturgy: The Calendar*, ed. Rachel Reeder (Evanston, IL: The Liturgical Conference, 1980), 8.