



Time: Stewardship of That Which Flies

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Soon bears us all away;
We fly forgotten as a dream
Dies at the op'ning day.

(Lutheran Service Book 733, St. 5)

These amazing words of the great hymn “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” capture, in far more poetic words, the wisdom that Grandma shared about the toilet paper roll. She often mused, “Ever notice that the closer you get to the end, the faster it spins?” For those with the perspective of decades of life, this wisdom bears itself out on an almost daily basis.

While the standard objective measurement of time never speeds up or slows down, there can be no doubt that because of the pace of 21st century life, it sure seems to have accelerated. We could posit various reasons for this sense of hurried life. Paul Harvey once said that the worst thing that happened to the pace of life was paved roads. When the unpaved roads would get too muddy, people would just have to stay put. But we now live in a world of concrete and asphalt that allows active people to get from place to place more easily. This enables people to commute longer distances to work and school, which consumes the precious commodity of time. Also, entertainment that used to end with prime time and the

news now stretches to 24 hours a day across hundreds of channels on cable or satellite, giving people reasons to spend hours that should be spent in sleep on other things of far less value.

The effect of this on the family is undeniable. Because of the hectic nature of the use of time, far less time is spent at the classic family dinner table. Other culprits include extended work hours and working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Increased involvement in organized team sports that travel also places demands on time together as a family. This is in addition to the many traditional activities such as scouting, 4-H, swim lessons, piano lessons and the like,



and one sees very quickly how the 168 hours of the week rush by, not like an ever-rolling stream, but more like a flooding torrent.

This flooding torrent washes away things in its path. A great casualty of this torrent is time in worship. When the hours of life become so programmed and filled to the point of bursting, something must give. Maybe more than ever, the old excuse about Sunday being the only day to sleep in may have just a little credence. The hours of Sunday morning that used to be reserved as so inviolate that communities and states once had blue laws against commerce, are now seen as hours that can be wrestled away for different pursuits like soccer, basketball or fishing.

The stewardship of time is a serious challenge to the local congregation. There has been a dramatic shift in this area over the last couple of decades. Twenty years ago, when a young pastor graduated from the seminary and arrived at his new parish, he would find that many of the members were more willing to give time toward a project rather than money. The Saturday morning work day at church was a staple of stewardship of the church building and grounds. But in these hectic latter days, the recent graduate will find members of boards and committees who place less value on their money than on their time. These are the vast majority of people who would

be more inclined to write a check to pay someone to do the job rather than make the sacrifice of ever-scarce time. The sweat equity that came from those who served extended congregational budgets. But now as time becomes a more valuable thing, that sweat equity has all but dried up like a creek in a drought, putting even more strain on those budgets.

This is not something with which the local congregation can become comfortable. Time, like every other part of creation, is a gift from the Lord that is to be stewarded. Just as generosity with money is a learned thing, so also it is necessary for the congregation to teach about the faithful stewardship of time. To teach this, the congregation doesn't have to have a Covey-style time management course. There is a more faithful, Biblical approach.

This approach starts with a call to repentance. This call might well take the form of a question: "Do you plan your worship around your week, or your week around your worship?" This is

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fundamentally the question of the Third Commandment. Despite Justin Bieber's claim that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to Taco Bell makes you a taco, the reality is that a faithful child of God really does need to be in worship. In worship the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies and keeps the believer in the true faith. In the sacred time that is the Divine Service, the stewardship of the Gospel is happening. When a person schedules the week around worship, it is a clear confession that preaching and the Word are not despised, but are being gladly heard and learned. But when the weekly calendar of the individual and the family is planned before time for worship is considered, then worship will likely become a regular casualty of the war over the hours in a week. Teaching this stewardship of time is a matter of spiritual life and death! It needs to be taught in such a way that members actually might start writing worship times in their weekly planner.

There are other ways that the local congregation can be sensitive to the ever-difficult stewardship of time. First, don't waste any of it. Stop meeting for the sake of meeting. If your committee doesn't have anything on the agenda, cancel the meeting and let the people go home to their families. Second, when you have business to attend to, don't waste time. Run an efficient meeting. Have a solid agenda. Have a





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chairperson or board member who is willing to enforce the agenda so that it can’t be hijacked into a coffee clutch. Treat the time as valuable. Set a time limit on meetings. If a board or committee or even a voters assembly can’t accomplish its task in less than two hours, then it needs to have multiple meetings. More often than not, longer meetings actually accomplish less. Time can be invested in dialogue, but not wasted in useless banter.

Another consideration is the way the congregation does its ministry. Program-based ministry is often a time drain. Make ministry task-based and needs-oriented. A family in the crisis of grief or divorce will invest time because they know that the Word of God speaks to their situation. Activity-based ministry outside of the regular worship and Bible class settings becomes just another time-spending option that won’t make a family’s calendar. However, if a task-based ministry is focused on a given task that has a predetermined amount of time, people are more willing to make the generous investment of the resource that is fleeting: time. Serving for the community Thanksgiving and Christmas meals is an example. Date, time and duration are known long before the event and can be scheduled.

Stewardship of time is far more than time management. It is really a faithful child of God managing time in a way that gives faithful witness to the Lord. As has often been said, the checkbook and family calendar show more about a family’s relationship with the Lord than anything else. Time can’t be slowed. The Lord will not likely cause the sun to stand still and move backward like He did for Joshua. But that doesn’t mean that all is lost. Faithful teaching of the Word of God from the pulpit and in Bible class can reclaim the sacred nature of the Christian’s stewardship of time. This is important for the families in a congregation, and it is critical for the congregation’s ministry.

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