

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

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Time is a problem for all of us. We never seem to have enough of it; we are running out of it when we are not marking it; trying to find it when we are not wasting it. We always try to be on it, but often get behind it. Time is a terrible hassle for us.

TWO WAYS

There are two ways to think about time, both of which can be found in the Bible as well as in our life today. One way is to think of time as simply sequence. The chronological character of time is all important for contemporary Western men and women; we think of time as something to be measured, by clocks and calendars. This chronological counting of time is not a modern phenomenon, although we stress it as much as any generation in history. Chronological time gets its descriptive sense from the Greek word chronos: the word which the New Testament uses to describe time as measured sequence or duration.

The other way of thinking about time is in terms of opportunity. It approaches moments and days, events and experiences, on the basis of the reality of their content and potential. We speak of doing things "at the right time." We say, "Now is the time," or "Time stands still," without much specific clarity as to what we mean. In contrast to our inability to articulate the meaning of this qualitative sense of time, the Bible has a rich word which it uses over and over again to describe time in terms of potential: the Greek word kairos.

Chronos may speak of a short time, such as "in a moment of time" (Luke 4:5); it may also refer to a long time, as when Paul says, "For a time of forty years he bore with them in the wilderness" (Acts 13:18). In both cases the sense of time is extent or duration, and the word used is chronos.

Kairos is used to describe more than that, as in the case of Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower and the soils: "But these have no root, they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:13). Throughout the New Testament the varied use of the concept of kairos is seen: "the time of harvest" (Matthew 13:30), "the signs of the times" (Matthew 16:3), "the time of visitation" (Luke 19:44), "redeem the time" (Ephesians 5:16, Colossians 4:5).

OUR TIME AND THEIR'S

Here the contrast between our world of thought and that of the Bible is most dramatically demonstrated. We understand chronos, perhaps better than almost anything else in our culture; but we are vague about what time means when it refers to opportunity or content. In the New Testament, and also in the Old, time seen simply as sequence is relatively unimportant. It is the potential of time which gives it meaning. They understood and built their life upon kairos.

Our life is spent in a series of meetings. Go to any gathering and suggest that the group hold another session and you will see one of the most characteristic pantomimes of contemporary society. Almost every participant will reach into the recesses of coat pockets or purses and draw out little calendars and begin to talk about time. And who of us has not seen or given avid attention to a wrist watch or a time clock, sometimes with a wistful glance and sometimes with a defiant stare. These are our tablets and monuments of chronos. They quickly come to rule our lives and to organize our society. Events are measured not by meaning or content, but by duration. Work becomes quantified for all of us. Travel is clocked in minutes or hours. Education, communication, entertainment, politics, community relations, family life and even sex are organized and assessed in terms of time. Worship itself bows down to the rule of chronos.

No wonder we have difficulty understanding the world of the prophets and the apostles. Chronos meant little if anything to them. Time was thought of in a much more qualitative sense. It was spoken of in terms of its content. It could refer to the realistic assessment of natural events: evening (Genesis 8:11), harvest (Matthew 13:30), rain (Ezra 10:13). It could refer to the celebrations or duties of social life: marriage (I Samuel 18:19), meals (Ruth 2:14), battle (I Chronicles 20:1), drawing water (Genesis 24:18). It could refer to the cycle of life itself: birth (Genesis 38:27), death (I Samuel 4:20). Kairos, along with its predecessor Hebrew word 'eth, was much more significant in interpreting time. Simple sequence was accepted, understood and set aside as secondary in importance.

THREE ASPECTS OF TIME

Events in time, for the Biblical writers, drew their meaning from three things. The first was opportunity. A time ('eth or kairos) was significant because it held within it the opportunity for something to take place. The catalogue of "times" in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 is the classic expression of this understanding. These are not listed nor linked because of sequence, but because of the varied and contrasting possibilities which each holds--a time to plant and a time to pluck, a time to break and a time to build, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to seek and a time to lose, a time to keep silence and a time to speak. Each moment in time is an opportunity, and all taken together are valued for the risk and the promise which they contain.

The second factor of events in time is the challenge to human response to the opportunity given. Time is not something valued or even assessed in isolation from the men and women who are involved in it. The opportunity of time challenges people to some form of appropriate action. Thus time is seen as a gift which demands a reply. One accepts or debates or refers or refuses the opportunity contained in time. Life is not measured solely by time, but by the way one relates to time.

The third aspect of events in time is that they are seen as the gift of God the Creator and Sustainer of life, who provides the opportunity to be found in time. Events are of God's ordaining and, even in responding to the opportunities of different times that appear to be most natural, we are actually responding to God. This is true of events of nature and events of history. God is seen at work in time in such a way as to provide meaning for each event as well as for the whole continuum. All events, therefore, have religious and theological significance.

THE PROPHETS

The prophets of Israel saw their mission as making plain to the nation that the events through which they were moving were not just accidental, but were a series of significant times given by God for God's own purposes. Thus the times demanded appropriate responses. The prophet may speak of judgment or hope or both, depending on the course of events. But he or she will speak and demand action in every historical situation because God is the One who gives the opportunity to be found in time. Thus, the prophets' words are directly tied to contemporary events and yet are even more significant beyond their day, precisely because they speak of and for the God who stands in and beyond all times.

The prophets view history as made up of various times which are of God's appointment. The prophet understands the kairos nature of events. He or she may be destroyed, but God is working God's purpose out at all times and in all time. Thus the word of God, which is always related to time, will abide and will not return empty or meaningless. The time of its fulfillment may be delayed, as Jeremiah came in anguish to see, but it will not be defeated.

JESUS

This helps us to see how the New Testament flows out of the faith and insight of the Old. The affirmation of the New Testament is that the expected time--the kairos--has come. This is presented first in the New Testament by Jesus himself: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

The time of which Jesus spoke is God's kairos. It is seen as the great moment of opportunity. The contents of that time were pointedly and personally related to the events by which God established Israel. That is why the writers of the New Testament were so eager to show that the events of Jesus' life were clearly the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. We do not need to follow them in every application of prophecy to the life of Christ. It is enough to recognize their working principle and to accept their central insight that the supreme kairos has come. What Jesus presents is the moment of opportunity. What God was intending in the Exodus and the creation of Israel becomes fulfilled in the time of his coming and the initiation of God's kingdom.

Because the time is fulfilled, this is the great moment of challenge to response. To accept and to be committed to that opportunity means life and wholeness and salvation. To neglect it or reject it is disaster. Jesus' introduction into history is the decisive expression of kairos. Repentance and belief are the indications of adequate response. Repentance means turning around and moving in the other direction. Our word belief comes from two Old English words meaning "by" and "life." Turn and by your life testify to the truth of God's good news in him. That is to respond to God's gift in Jesus Christ, to accept the opportunity inherent in this fulfillment of kairos.

THE APOSTLES

The apostles see themselves as having "discerned the signs of the time" (cf. Matthew 16:3). By the grace of God they have responded to the gift which God has given. Paul insists that Christians "know what hour it is, how it is full time now for

you to wake from sleep" (Romans 13:11). On more than one occasion he exhorts his sisters and brothers in Christ to "make the most of the times" (Ephesians 5:16, Colossians 4:5). He holds before the Christians in Corinth the challenge of the present moment as the kairos for them (and for us): "Behold, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation" (II Corinthians 6:2, referring to Isaiah 49:8).

Thus, in the New Testament we see that the understanding of time is not that of duration or mechanical progress or chronology. It is basically one of promise and fulfillment, in which history is made up of times in which God gives opportunity and challenges us to respond. The central and determinative opportunity which God gives is the life and death and victory of Jesus Christ. His time is our ultimate kairos.

PAST AND FUTURE

Time, in this Biblical sense, is in some state of tension with the past and with the future. It is related to the past, in that it draws from the past its reference points. The time of Exodus and the time of the prophets inform the time of Jesus. Fulfillment implies relationship to earlier hopes and expectations. Therefore, part of the content of opportunity in time is its relationship to the past and the possibility of earlier potential becoming realized.

But time is also related to the future. The meaning of the present opportunity cannot be interpreted except in terms of some ultimate goal or direction. A trip can only be described if we have some way of indicating where it begins and where it ends. It is in this sense that the Biblical understanding of time is always straining toward eternity. References to time in the New Testament are easily applicable to eschatological understandings of the future. The fulfillment of time is yet to be fully realized. Jesus has come, but Jesus is also coming. There is an unfinished quality in time, which is part of its content and its potential.

TIME IS QUALITATIVE

Time is not just the quantitative calculation of minutes and hours and days and years. Time has a qualitative sense about it. Not all moments are the same and they are to be judged by the opportunity which they contain on the basis of what God has done and of what God is yet doing.

It can be argued that the technological and organizational progress of our society is rooted in the commitment which we have made to time in the sense of chronos. We could not think in terms of corporations and committees and computers and count downs if it were not for the understanding of time as chronological duration.

On the other hand, it is perhaps this thoroughgoing commitment to time as being entirely quantitative which is guaranteeing the flat, gray, measured world of chronos which we are in process of becoming. To say that there is a qualitative character of time is to speak heresy to modern ears. But this is precisely what the Biblical faith does. God has moved in history in decisive events and God is still on the move. Part of our task is to seek to understand what God has done in the past in order that we may be better equipped to read with alertness the signs of the time concerning what God is doing today. A part of our task is also to read the signs of the contemporary times with eyes cocked and ears tuned toward the future, so that the immediacy of present events does not blind us nor deafen us to God's movement

and destination.

What does this mean for us today? The Biblical faith and orientation helps to bring a radical critique to bear upon our contemporary cultural commitment to chronos. Some years ago, my family was hosting an African family who was in this country while the father was studying at an American university. I took them shopping one Saturday and, at one shop which specialized in household goods and kitchenwares, a clerk took particular interest in them and showed them many items which could be used in their university apartment. After some time he came over to me and said, "We must buy something from this store." I asked if he had found something he especially liked, to which he replied: "No, but I must buy something from her. She has given us so much of her time." What a cultural difference! From my Western roots, it would never have occurred to me to buy something just because I had taken a clerk's time. But it is that valuing of time--another's as well as one's own--which moves in the direction of kairos.

The Biblical writers shared that general cultural orientation with my African friend. Time is qualitative in nature and is to be valued for the opportunity which lies within it, not least of all the opportunity of relating to others. There is a genuine fullness of time which most of us miss. And missing it causes us to miss some of the richness and meaning of faith and of life.

ADVENT

We are approaching the Season of Advent. It is the best season of the year to talk with our people about the meaning of time, in the contemporary and in the Biblical sense. For one thing, this is the beginning of the Christian Year and all know that it is not the beginning of the calendar year. Inherent in that difference is the contrast between chronos and kairos.

For another thing, with the approach of Christmas everyone is increasingly aware that all time is not the same. The excitement of pre-Christmas anticipation, compared with the dog days of August, helps everyone to see that chronos has not said the last, nor even the most significant, word about time. The difference in the days of December is the sense of opportunity which is contained in them. Taken even in their most commercially extravagant sense, these days are days of kairos, when the time is judged by the possibilities inherent in it.

When you dig underneath that to the deeper significance of Advent, you are focusing upon the meaning of kairos. For Advent is the anticipation of God's great Gift, the greatest opportunity to which we are challenged to respond. It is tied to the past--"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). But it is also tied to the future:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

The One who has come is the One who is coming. Therefore we live not only in the monotony of tick-tock time, but also in the tension of Advent time. The words of institution of the Lord's Supper set that tension before us and call us, not only to his meal, but also to his mission: "'Do this . . . remembering me.' . . . until he comes."