

Go Deeper: Christians and Time

Here is a short article about Christian discipleship and different aspects of being in time. It takes a more theoretical perspective, but might spark off ideas for your own group or church.

(15 minute read)

In this life at least, we sit within time, and can't escape it or turn it back – as anyone with grey or receding hair well knows! This might feel a bit depressing. But one of the most important aspects of being and enabling Christian disciples is about how we use the time we've been given. Here are some more ideas for exploring how we can become disciples who inhabit time well without being overwhelmed by it. This won't give you neat answers, but it might help ask some of the right questions so that, in theologian John Swinton's words, we learn to 'become friends of time'.¹

God is the Author and Director of Time

Our starting point for this session is recognising that as disciples within time and history. God is the author of time, the Alpha and Omega. God sits outside the passing of time and is not affected by it: 'you remain the same and your years will never end' says Psalm 102.27. The good news in all of this is that God doesn't sit outside time just watching us get on with it. **God is active within human history, most obviously when God became incarnate in Jesus. He entered history. He changes it from the inside.** God points history, says Gustavo Gutierrez, 'in the direction of the establishment of justice and right'.² As we explored in the last session, our calling is to join in with what God is doing in history. But how? There's so much to say about this, but here are a few key things to explore together.

We have a Foot in Two Camps

First, as Christians, we're citizens of both time and eternity. Although there are some kinds of Christianity which see earthly life as simply a waiting room for heaven, this arguably isn't how the Bible – or most Christians through history – have understood it. Living in the light of God's eternal purposes should fuel to the fire of our discipleship today, not make us passive spectators of history. The eternal promise raises our sight to something more, and better. Even secular psychologists have recognised this.³ But the very good news is that we don't wait around until death to begin to experience this. Dallas Willard writes: 'The Gospel of the Kingdom is that no one is beyond beatitude [blessing], because the rule of God from the heavens is available to all. Everyone can reach it, and it can reach everyone'.⁴ If it's about us getting into heaven, it's also

¹ John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness and Gentle Discipleship* (2017).

² Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (1983), 7.

³ See for example, Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd, *The Time Paradox: The New Psychology of Time that will Change your Life* (2009).

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (1998), ***.

about God getting heaven into us – today. **How would that eternal perspective make a difference to the struggles and challenges we face as Christians and as churches today? And how do we begin to cultivate it?**

Time is a Gift

In the contemporary West, we often talk about time as if it was a bit like money or possessions. We talking about ‘spending’ time, or ‘wasting’ it. But for us as Christians, time is first, and most importantly, a **gift**. What’s the most appropriate response to receiving a present? It’s to be thankful (even if it’s a really bad tie or a set of vacuum cleaner bags...). So, very very practically, **how can we develop a habit of thankfulness for God’s gift of time to us** – even during the hard times? But by the same token, it’s also a gift that we make use of. **How, practically, might we review the way we use our time**, and lay that before God?

Living with a ‘Great Cloud of Witnesses’

One of the other gifts of time, as a Christian, is that we’re part of a big family of God’s people throughout history. If you’re in a church that uses liturgy regularly, you’re likely to know the words of the Nicene Creed: ‘we believe in the communion of saints’. Hebrews 12.1 says: ‘Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us’. We’re part of a great movement of Christians through history – living and dead – all trying to live out God’s purposes. **We can take encouragement from those who have gone before us. How might you do this practically?** One pioneer mission initiative I know meet in a coffee shop, and ‘saint of the day’ is always part of their conversation. The idea was actually suggested by a non-churchgoing member of the group!

Reading the Signs of the Times

One way all this helps in our Christian discipleship today is to remind us that **the way things are is not the way things have always been – or will be**. Jesus challenges some of his hearers: ‘you know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you do not know how to read the times of the signs’ (Matthew 16.3). Learning from Christians in previous centuries can remind us of paths of worship, prayer, discipleship and mission that we have forgotten. It can hold up a mirror to contemporary society and church, highlighting things other societies cared about and we’ve tended to overlook. Reading our times faithfully isn’t straightforward; it requires prayer discernment. But you can find a couple of activities to help you in the other **Go Deeper** materials accompanying this session.

Worship Disrupts Ordinary Time

Worship does funny things to time. Perhaps you’ve experienced being lost in worship or prayer, to the point that you had no idea how much time had passed since you started. In worship, for example, we don’t just remember the past stories of faith; in a sense, we re-enact them together, if only in a limited way. In the whole of life, but particularly in worship, we find ourselves no nearer or further from God than any other Christian at any other time or place in history. Also,

as Tish Harrison Warren writes, praying the liturgy through all times and seasons ‘draw us out of ourselves, out of our time-bound moment, into the long story of Christ’s work in and through his people over time’. It can also - if we let it - teach us the ‘craft of watching’ for what God is doing in the here and now.⁵ In this sense, worship is a particularly intense kind of what Johann Baptist Metz calls ‘dangerous memory’ - in which we remember that through the cross, ‘God has not abandoned anyone to final humiliation and defeat’.⁶ This stands as a direct challenge to the ‘powers and principalities’ of this world who claim that they have the final say. How can our corporate worship - its prayers, songs, stories and liturgy - become practical tools to fire our commitment to living out the ‘dangerous memory’ of God’s Kingdom in the present?

The Stages of Life

In the last session we explored Christian discipleship as a lifelong journey. But it’s also one involving different stages. Being a disciple of Jesus is about recognising and working with those stages and seasons, recognising that it’s natural for new opportunities to be opened up, and others to be closed off. **What opportunities have been opened up and closed off for you in different stages of life? And how can we help others identify and respond to those life stages for themselves?** For a church or group, another very helpful thing we can do is to reflect on the shape of modern life and how it’s changed. By the time my parents were 26, they had got married, found steady jobs, bought a house and had their first child. For their children’s generation (born 1970s), that was almost unheard of. Over a century ago, the state pension age was first set at 70 because few people were expected to live much beyond that. Today, many 70 year olds are ‘third agers’ with a full and active retirement (though this does vary between rich and poor). Extreme old age (or ‘fourth age’) often doesn’t begin until after 80. Reflecting on the changing shape of the contemporary life course can help us understand how to support people through different stages.

Living the Seasons

Just as there are stages to our personal and social lives, we live in a world with a natural rhythm of seasons. In his beautiful book *How to Inhabit Time*, the American Christian writer Jamie Smith encourages us to take seriously that seasons are a very natural part of the world God has made. ‘To everything, there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven’ (Ecclesiastes 3.1). **Reflecting on the seasons can help us come to terms with the seasons of life. But working with the seasons can also give us a framework for opportunities to accompany others on a discipleship journey.** We know this from some of the great recent work that children’s and families ministers do around Easter, Christmas and Pentecost. But what are some of the other seasons of the Christian year – and of the secular calendar – that can become opportunities for exploring faith? Some have a serious purpose: holocaust memorial day, Children in Need, World Book Day, for example. Others are a bit more frivolous: who on earth decided that 4th

⁵ Tish Harrison Warren, *Prayer in the Night: For Those who Work or Watch or Weep* (2021), 9, 59.

⁶ Candace McClearn, ‘Theology 101: Dangerous Memories’ (<https://dailytheology.org/2015/12/11/theology-101-dangerous-memories/>)

September is Eat an Extra Dessert Day?! As discipleship enablers, how could we structure opportunities to explore different aspects of faith around popular (and more obscure) festivals and calendar dates? And whilst we often think about the big seasons of the year, let's not forget the small seasons of the everyday as well: how we build a rhythm of work, rest and sabbath. We'll explore that in a future session.

Marking the Turning Points

Just as there are stages and seasons to life, there are also **turning points between them. These can be times of excitement, but also of stress, anxiety, or regret. These are times we or others may need particular support or encouragement.** They can also be opportunities for prayer and reflection. Some great work has been done over recent decades on big life events – baptism, marriage and funerals, for example – and you can find some of it on the C of E's Church Support Hub.⁷ Church schools are often good at recognising and helping children mark the transition from primary to secondary school. But what about other key turning points? How do we mark, celebrate or mourn at other important times, such as getting a first job, losing a job, going through menopause, or retiring from work? What would it look like for a church or group to provide opportunities for prayer, worship or reflection at those times?

Being Intergenerational

These many transition points emphasise how we're a church of different generations – certainly across a local area, nation and world, if not always within a particular congregation. Generations can relate to each other in different ways. Sometimes (as in Judges 2.7-11) successive generations can simply reject the wisdom of their predecessors. In the history of the Kings of Israel and Judah, you can see how each successive generation instead repeats the same pattern as their predecessors, but without actually learning from their mistakes. Between Saul and David you can see outright generational conflict, with each jealous of the other. Perhaps more positive role models can be found in the story of Elijah and Elisha, where the older prophet mentors the younger. Or in the beautiful story of Ruth and Naomi, where the younger provides for the older, even at great personal cost.⁸ How can we provide some opportunities for discipleship development which are wholly intergenerational, and others which might be quite specific to particular generations' needs, hopes and concerns?

Being Eloquent when not in Control

We can't control the passage of time, and nor should we expect to. But we can choose what we do with the time we have. Even at those times of life when the choices are limited, we can choose how we receive what we are given. Writing about the growth of the early church, the historian Alan Kreider argues that Christianity first spread not because of political power, money or influential connections. Instead, Christians were trained in the virtues of patience, of love in

⁷ <https://churchsupporthub.org/>

⁸ David Hilborn and Matt Bird, *God and the Generations: Youth, Age and the Church Today* (2002), 158-76.

the face of opposition, and of hope that God was bigger than the worst of human history. As a result, Kreider says, Christians were ‘most often eloquent when they were not in control of situations’.⁹ Their loving actions got them noticed – especially in challenging times. In Romans 5.3, Paul writes: ‘we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope’. This is the stuff of discipleship.

I wonder what thoughts all of this sparks off for your own discipleship? And for enabling and accompanying others in their discipleship journeys too - both in one-to-one relationships, in your small group, or in your local church as a whole?

⁹ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (2016), 69.