

# CLERGY TIME MANAGEMENT

## Methods are not Enough!

BY HERB MILLER

Most clergy would agree with Peter Drucker that time is the scarcest resource: Unless you manage time, nothing else can be managed.

Yet most clergy identify time as something over which they have little control. How can you manage time when two funerals appear in the middle of Bible school week? What can you do when an unexpected marriage-counseling crisis appears during your only available time to prepare Sunday night's Bible study? How can you manage your time in a profession where unexpected interruptions often provide your best opportunities for ministry?

### Seven Basic Principles

Learning the standard time-management methods familiar to the business world is not enough. Firm belief in – or failure to believe in – seven basic theological-psychological principles determines whether we are willing to apply well-known time-management methods. Without these seven convictions firmly rooted in our psyche, learning effective time-management methods makes little difference. The concepts will bounce off our behavior patterns like hailstones off two-inch steel plate.

#### PRINCIPLE #1

God requires that we manage our time. 'Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy,' the Apostle Paul said to us (1 Corinthians 4:2). God prizes the stewardship of our time at least as much as the stewardship of our money. Time does not belong to us but to God. We are only stewards of it. Pastors who decide to manage their time as a spiritual stewardship of life can apply time-tested management techniques. Those who do not see and apply this truth will continue to let circumstances manage their lives.

#### PRINCIPLE #2

We will never be more effective in our ministries and our lives than our effectiveness in managing time. No matter how gifted the pastor, failure in time management spells failure in ministry.

#### PRINCIPLE #3

We all have the same amount of time. People who get things done have the same number of hours in each week as people who don't get things done. They simply use their hours more effectively and more efficiently.

#### PRINCIPLE #4

We must take charge of our time, or other people will take charge of it for us. Plenty of people stand in line to take charge of a pastor's time. If he or she neglects this responsibility, others will handle it.

#### PRINCIPLE #5

We have all the time we need to do God's will for our lives. Can you imagine a God who is so unfair that he gives you a job to do and then steals the time that you need to do it? When you find yourself constantly running out of time, one or the other or both of two things is happening: Either you are doing things that are not God's will for you to do with your life and gifts, or you are doing God's will in an inefficient manner. For most people, it is about 50/50.

#### PRINCIPLE #6

We are never powerless over time problems. We can take control of our time and life. We are not victims of time damage; we are accomplices.

#### PRINCIPLE #7

Our psychological makeup greatly influences our ability to manage time. Examples: (a) High-anxiety people have difficulty managing their time. The higher the anxiety level, the greater the difficulty concentrating on and living out a consistent plan, (b) Constant feelings of low-grade depression mitigate against good time management. The more depressed people are, the more they have difficulty concentrating, (c) Strong relational needs that often accompany gregarious personalities can 'eat up' time. Pastors have several responsibilities that they can only accomplish when they are alone. One of those is preparing sermons, (d) A high need for recognition can decrease time-management ability, because it can cause people to

say yes to more requests than they can accommodate, (e) Age is a factor. Pastors born after 1946 grew up in a culture that values leisure above work. They therefore tend to feel mildly guilty and uncomfortable if their lifestyle is short on leisure and long on work. Pastors born before 1946 grew up in a culture that values work above leisure. They therefore tend to feel mildly guilty and uncomfortable if their lifestyle is short on work and long on leisure. Some pastors born before 1946 become obsessive-compulsive workaholics. Some pastors born after 1946 become excessive-compulsive leisureholics. Either extreme damages time-management ability.

The way those seven principles play out in a pastor's thought systems and emotional circuits greatly influences whether he or she uses or does not use effective time-management methods.

## **Fourteen Proven Methods**

### **METHOD #1: GET CLEAR ABOUT YOUR CENTRAL PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES**

Good time management results from making the right decisions about the right priorities. Until we get our priorities straight, we will never get our time straight. Decide precisely what gifts God has given you that you alone can and should do in your ministry setting. The ability to separate those from the many other things that you and other people think you ought to do is the bottom-line determiner of ministerial time-use effectiveness.

All essential matters are important, but not all important matters are essential. If you are the senior pastor, one of your essentials is preaching. Another essential is hospital calls, especially to gravely ill persons. Other essentials will vary from parish to parish. List the key essentials in your particular congregation. If your time begins to fray, check your list.

You have probably drifted off of essentials into important items.

### **METHOD #2: PRACTICE ZERO-BASED TIME MANAGEMENT**

Every minister experiences a creeping loss of time control as he or she develops new projects and programs. That accumulation usually starts in the fall and builds through the year.

Each August, as a part of personal devotion time, do zero-based time management. List all the things you do each month. After two or three days, come back to the list and ask yourself which items are essentials. Which items could other people do, if you gave them the proper opportunity and training? Once you make these decisions, list the people to whom you could delegate these responsibilities. Then, do it.

### **METHOD #3: SPEND MOST OF YOUR TIME WORKING IN AREAS WHERE YOU ARE STRONG RATHER THAN TRYING TO PROP UP YOUR WEAKNESSES**

Clergy perform nine functions: preaching preparation, teaching and preparation, calling, counseling, reading, church-related meetings, community-service meetings, administrative matters, and denominational work. Of these nine, most clergy do three well. What about the other six? You will have to do them, but you will do them adequately, not spectacularly. Don't spend your life feeling guilty about those six things that you can't do well. Go with the flow of your strengths. Only God is good at everything.

### **METHOD #4: LEARN HOW TO DELEGATE**

Several kinds of hangups keep people from delegating effectively. The most common hangup is perfectionism, accompanied by the feeling that 'Nobody can do this quite as well as I can do it.' Another hangup is the fear of giving away power and authority. Another is the sense of security that many people find in doing detail work (when they quit doing details, they begin feeling insecure and unconsciously seek more details to do).

Good delegators convince themselves that other people can do a job well if given sufficient time, training, and authority. As the delegator gains experience, he or she learns that delegating is a ministry. When people succeed at the responsibilities delegated to them, their self-esteem increases. An effective delegator enables other people to experience the same joy, achievement, and creativity that he or she likes to experience.

### **METHOD #5: LEARN HOW TO SAY NO GRACIOUSLY**

Because clergy have answered the call to enter a profession in which they are supposed to help people, their minds get set in a yes mode. Saying no doesn't feel right. Unfortunately, however, saying yes to enough things means you will eventually have to say no to something. Because saying no feels emotionally inappropriate, effective pastors memorize responses that they can use in those situations. Examples:

- 'I surely would like to, but I just can't.' Most pastors find this works best as a solo sentence. Avoid giving a long list of

arguments for why you can't do it. People tend to assume that you have good reasons for saying no. A long explanation, no matter how valid, may sound flimsy when they compare it to the speaking invitation they are trying to get you to accept.

- 'I am honored to be asked, but I have another commitment that requires preparation time that week. If I say yes to you, I will be letting those folks down, and I'm sure you wouldn't want me to do that. Do me a favor and let me say no.' This response assumes that the askers are persons of great integrity. If they push you, they will have to disprove your affirmation of their character.

#### **METHOD #6: PLAN YOUR TIME IN WEEK-LONG BLOCKS, NOT IN HOURS OR DAYS**

Set up a sheet with twenty-one time blocks – morning, afternoon, and evening for each of the seven days of each week, (This does not replace the weekly calendar on which you put appointments; that's another matter.) Set aside all three blocks on one day for a day off. That leaves eighteen blocks. Assign two additional evening blocks to leisure and family. That leaves sixteen blocks. Plug in the appropriate number of blocks for sermon preparation and hospital calling. Many pastors also designate one evening block each week for visiting unchurched persons (perhaps Monday evening) and another evening for visiting members (perhaps Tuesday).

Some senior pastors in multiple-staff churches ask each staff member to share his or her planning guide with other staff members at each weekly staff meeting. This helps everyone hold each other to his or her best and ensures that staff families don't get deleted from the clergy concern list.

#### **METHOD #7: EXPECT INTERRUPTIONS, BUT DON'T LET EVERY INTERRUPTION CONTROL YOU**

Interruptions are part of every pastor's job. You must push back a deadline on an important project if something essential interrupts you. But make sure that you set priorities in ways that allow you to distinguish between essential interruptions and important interruptions. (As with football, you tackle the guy who comes through the line carrying the little brown ball. You don't tackle everybody who comes through the line.)

Some pastors find it helpful to develop a 'hierarchy of interrupters' – things they will allow to divert them from another function. With this procedure, items on the top of the list can interrupt items lower down, but not vice-versa. Example:

- God (this would include study, sermon preparation, and prayer life).
- Spouse (your spouse needs to know that he or she is the most important person in your life).
- Children.
- Church leaders.
- Church members.
- Non-church members.
- Denominational responsibilities.
- Civic work.

#### **METHOD #8: USE YOUR PRIME TIME OF THE DAY FOR TASKS THAT REQUIRE YOUR BEST THINKING ABILITY**

Pastors, like everyone else, have different circadian rhythms (physiological patterns that cause people to peak in energy, thinking ability, and brain function at certain times of the day). No amount of willpower changes that system. For many pastors, prime time happens in the morning hours; for others, afternoons allow the best creative thinking.

The larger the church, the more pastors need to select a place as well as a time for study and sermon preparation. Many pastors have a room somewhere besides their church office where they go for study. The secretary screens contacts during those hours by saying, "The pastor is in her time of study and prayer. She will be available at 11:00 a.m." Productivity radically increases if you can concentrate for a block of time in a protected location.

#### **METHOD #9: SET DEADLINES IN YOUR MIND AND ON PAPER FOR ACCOMPLISHING PARTICULAR MAJOR TASKS**

Many effective pastors say that every time they decide to do something, they 'when it.' In other words, they say, 'When am I going to have it done?' Creative juices flow best when you work against deadlines (for some people, that is the only time they flow).

#### **METHOD #10: LEARN HOW TO USE WAITING OR IDLE MOMENTS FOR READING OR TAPE LISTENING**

Automobile travel is one such opportunity. Audiotapes can transform dead time into continuing education.

#### **METHOD #11: IF YOU HAVE A SECRETARY, LEARN HOW TO USE A DICTATING MACHINE**

Dictate (in addition to letters) filing or project assignments to your secretary and memos to staff. This can save countless hours of conversations with a secretary – a procedure that eats up time for two people, not just one.

#### **METHOD #12: DON'T TRY TO REMEMBER ANYTHING**

Most people are under the illusion that they can remember what someone tells them and what they promise people they will do. That assumption is only partially accurate. Memory systems are quite fallible, and clergy credibility eventually gets damaged when information about hospitalized parishioners and promises to put something in the newsletter fall through the cracks of a busy week. The following four-point system allows a pastor to handle countless details without having to remember anything:

- Carry a small notebook in your pocket or purse. If you decide to take care of something next week, don't rely on your ability to remember it. Write it on a page in your notebook. (Don't make lists. Put a new item on each page.)
- When you arrive at the office each morning, tear out the notes and stack them in action stacks on your desktop – phone calls to make, letters to dictate, etc. Between interruptions, try to complete these action stacks by the end of that day.
- Empty one of your desk drawers and designate it your "crisis drawer." Put in this drawer items that you cannot do this week because you are waiting for someone to call or write with the information you need. Every Monday morning, open the crisis drawer and look at each sheet of paper. Some matters have now become genuine crises. You must telephone someone and get the information this week, before it is too late. Other items can wait another week or more, so you put them back in the drawer.
- Set up a monthly calendar file (some people call this a tickler file). Whatever you call it, get twelve file folders. Label them with the twelve months of the year and put them in a nearby file cabinet.

Those four methods work together in a synergistic way that releases you from the pressure of having to remember everything. If you plan to do something, write it down and put it into the flow of this four-point system. Work on the phone calling and action stacks on your desk daily, so they do not accumulate. Open the crisis drawer weekly. Open the calendar file monthly. The result: You will develop a reputation as a dependable, capable person who gets things done.

#### **METHOD #13: HANDLE YOUR MAIL ONLY ONCE**

Some pastors open their mail, glance at it, and lay it on the desk. They come back the next day and look at it again, trying to decide what to do with it. Some people look at their mail four or five times. What a horrendous waste of time!

Take one of four actions with every piece of mail.

- Read it and throw it away.
- File it, or dictate instructions that ask your secretary to file it for you.
- Take action on it immediately, or put it in one of the action stacks on your desk—phone calls, letters to write, etc.
- Put it in the 'take action tomorrow' stack on your desk (some mail is complicated and you need to think about it overnight before responding). By tomorrow, you will know what to do with the item – dictate a letter, file it, put it in the crisis drawer or calendar file, etc.

#### **METHOD #14: BE CONCERNED ABOUT EVERYTHING IN THE CHURCH, BUT AVOID THE COMPULSIVE TENDENCY TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR EVERYTHING IN THE CHURCH**

Concern for people and projects means you are a Christian. Taking responsibility for everything in the church means you are playing God.

Assume responsibility for what belongs to you. Give responsibility for other things to other people. Otherwise, you are breaking one of the Ten Commandments. You are stealing.

After you have completed your horizontal delegation to other people, a few items will remain that neither you nor other people can handle. Delegate these to God. This skill produces mental balance. Pastors who don't learn vertical delegation will have a driven, ineffectual ministry, and some of them will suffer an emotional breakdown.

How can pastors find the time to effectively accomplish their ministry? They can't. Time is never lost, only poorly used. If pastors see themselves as stewards of a precious gift and build on that conviction with effective habits, effective ministry results.

First, decide on your life and ministry priorities. Second, decide to use your time to accomplish those priorities, instead of the dozens of other important matters that clamor for control of your clock. Function from this life-management perspective, rather than a perspective of trying to use time more efficiently, and you find the time about which other people only dream.

# REST: A LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

By Bonnie Banks

Rest, one of the most vital elements of leadership success, is too often the most overlooked. In the quest for leadership excellence, leaders today garner a plethora of strategizing techniques, technological skills and marketing methodologies to ensure organizational competitiveness. Yet, in all of the efforts toward success, rest among leaders has become compromised as a casualty of advancement. The average number of daily work hours for Americans has increased by 14.5% over the past eight years, resulting in a 46-hour week. Among America's leaders, that figure has risen an additional 22%, resulting in an average working week of 56 hours, leaving precious little time for needed rest (Thornton, 2007).

Rest can be defined as the cessation of energy requiring activities, including work, for the purpose of allowing for physical and mental relaxation, renewal and revitalization (Harvey, 2000). The purpose of this article is to emphasize the importance of rest as a vital component of optimum functioning and success for organizational leaders. By highlighting the factors that are responsible for and resulting from the decrease of rest among leaders, this article provides a foundation upon which to establish the need for rest as both an expedient and practical facet of leadership application.

## Hindrances to Rest and Renewal

Contributing factors to the decrease in rest time for leaders include a shifting work ethic and the technological advances designed to fuel widening and continuous connectivity. Unlike the work ethic of the early 19th century, which allowed for the compartmentalization of work as a mere component of a life centered around family and relationships, work today appears to be the basis upon which individuals define themselves and the means by which leaders measure levels of commitment to their organizations (Wren, 2005). Increasingly, success in leadership characterizes a life comprised of grueling expectations, excessively long hours and instant accessibility both on and away from the job. Moreover, organizational strategy, since the onset of the industrial revolution, has continued to emphasize efficiency as the mantra for status and achievement in all levels of commerce. Endeavors toward efficiency correspondingly inform processes and the sociotechnical systems organizations employ to meet said goals.

Technology integration, for all of its utility in today's marketplace, has added to leaders' surplus of responsibilities, while also diminishing leaders' need for rest. There are a myriad of complex reasons for this phenomenon, including increasing demands for instantaneous borderless communication and immediate solutions for complex problems. With all of the advances in technology, ease of communication and speed of service, it would seem that rest would have become a welcomed recompense for all the hard work that initially went into optimizing efficiency, virtualizing offices and eventually flattening the world (Friedman, 2007). Notwithstanding the sustained energies it takes to maintain and continue to enhance burgeoning capabilities, the overall result of progress in industry and technology appears to regress when it comes to quality of life issues like rest and renewal for leaders.

As demands for low cost are increasing, the need for faster productivity is driving leaders to streamline budget items and demand longer working hours (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Additionally, as leader behavior sets the tone for an organization and becomes institutionalized as both acceptable and expected, the marginalization of rest becomes perpetual (Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006). In organizational environments where gaining profits and market share take priority over all else, leaders who aspire to succeed may feel the need to embrace these values and engage the accompanying behaviors, which, for the sake of productivity, effectively compromise leaders' personal need for rest. Coupled with fatigue, stress, fear of job loss and the unrealistic expectation of stoicism formidably oppose leaders' abilities to aptly rest. The stoic mentality suggests that leaders ought to work incessantly and joyously without acknowledging fatigue or the stress overwork causes (Johns, 2006). In essence, taking time for rest has somehow become associated with slackness, weakness, non-competitiveness or low commitment to organizational goals (Knight Ridder, 2007).

Undoubtedly, organizations and their leaders desire to be high functioning. Including rest as both a personal and professional imperative can ensure that organizational goals are given the attention and focus needed for ultimate achievement. Making a deliberate effort to prioritize rest and renewal as a part of daily living will likely create the wholeness that can only be brought about

through relaxation and personal reflection. Boyce (2006) asserts that people with balanced schedules, who include periods of rest and renewal, are better able to combat the stress that so often contributes to fatigued induced losses. Indeed, leadership success does not have to be defined by imbalance.

## Recommendations

Overall, the commitment to an organization's success must translate to the optimal presentation of the individuals that comprise its members. The following are strategic actions leaders can implement to achieve needed rest and renewal.

- **Redefine leadership success**

In order to begin the process of prioritizing rest, leaders need to alter their definitions, actions and ideas related to personal and organizational success. Due to the fact that it is the perception of an idea that informs the analogous actions that individuals will take in guaranteeing its manifestation, leaders must learn to perceive rest as valuable and a vital component for both personal and professional enrichment.

- **Employ time management**

Determine what requires immediate attention and decipher important items from those that are neither urgent nor important.

- **Delegate**

The art of trusting others to carry out responsibilities is learned over time. However, engaging a leadership development program allows for the training and coaching needed to ensure that organizational goals are handled expediently and competently by those placed in charge.

- **Get needed sleep consistently**

Research by the National Sleep Foundation (NSF) (2008) suggests that improper rest among individuals significantly contributes to poor organizational performance and cost increases related to tiredness among workers.

- **Keep the Sabbath**

"And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made" (Genesis 2:2). It is here that God established the precedent for rest from labor and renewal of the spirit. Research indicates that people who rest consistently perform much better than those who do not (Harvey, 2000).

- **Plan time for renewal**

Not only are adequate amounts and quality of sleep important, seven to eight hours nightly according to the NSF (2008), whole periods of rest away from intense work related activities scheduled at regular intervals (quarterly, for example) are expedient for the renewal process.

## Conclusion

Leaders must employ conscious efforts to include rest as a life priority. Leaders can only realize maximum performance when periods of rest are scheduled uncompromisingly and as a matter of routine. Notwithstanding meritorious issues on both sides of the current debate surrounding the description of America as "the no-vacation nation," the underlying premise highlighting the need for rest bares worthy consideration.

As long as leaders perceive rest as having little or no importance, organizations' performance will continue to suffer. However, as leaders demonstrably accept and support the need for rest, organizations and families will reap the benefits of having optimized members.

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# THE CASE AGAINST COVEY

## Tim Vickers Uncovers the Toxins in 7 Habits

What is it with lifestyle gurus? They promise significance, success, wealth, fame, efficiency, balance, integration, promotion, peace of mind and endless good cheer. And millions believe that they can deliver it. Christians are not immune. After all, many of us are wondering how on earth we can fit everything into our increasingly busy lives – the pleasures of family, friends and church, the joys and benefits of interesting and challenging work, purpose and meaning, good sleep, refreshing hobbies and firm abdomens. So, we find Christian conferences selling Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, probably the most successful personal management book ever, turning over 1.5 million copies per year. It is used as essential training by over 16,000 organisations and has spawned a multi-million dollar business. It is such a highly influential book that even the president of the USA has endorsed it. And it's written by a devout Mormon.

### What's 7 Habits About?

Effective people are those who don't lose sight of the bigger things in life, who manage their diaries to ensure that however busy and demanding the day is, the important things are never neglected. They are people who develop habits which enable them to achieve everything they want effectively and smoothly. They are people who routinely monitor their success, with a view to constant improvement. They are focused individuals who get to the end of life and look back with happiness at all they have done.

Covey's sub-title is 'Restoring the Character Ethic' a reference to the concept that Aristotle developed to describe the virtuous, or good, life. Virtue led to happiness, and happiness (or the contented reflection on a life lived without regret) was the ultimate aim of life. Character enables individuals to increase in virtue, and so to better achieve their goal of happiness. Character can be enhanced by virtuous habits, and checked against the norms of society. As such 'virtues' in a given age or location or culture may vary from those elsewhere. Covey's overall aim, then, is to show us how to live the 'good life' in the 20th-21st centuries.

Ironically, although 7 Habits' claims to seek to restore character to the centre of life, it reads in the main like a time management guide, with useful procedures for thinking through how to get the most important things done on a daily, weekly and longer term basis. Nonetheless, we should be aware that these techniques are permeated with a philosophy which is profoundly at odds with the Gospel of Christ.

### The Importance of Worldview

Here is Aristotle's argument: everyone wants to be happy above all else; to be happy you have to live a good life; goodness is defined by your values, your worldview. Therefore, to understand how to achieve happiness, you need to have a clear picture of your worldview.

Here Covey hits a major problem: he is a believing Mormon, but he knows that any hard sell of Mormonism will cripple his 'best-selling' status. So, although he doesn't believe in a pluralistic relativism, he (perhaps hypocritically) leaves the reader free to import whatever worldview or belief system they want. He then creates a value system common to all readers by unearthing a set of 'universal principles' or 'natural laws', which he claims help us all to keep the chief priority of our particular worldview at the centre of our lives.

This approach leaves the way open for Christians to drop their own position into the Covey formula, and in theory come out with a Christian solution. His use of religious sounding language about church, family, selfishness, etc. strikes a further chord for many Christian readers and might make us feel comfortable with his general flow. The trouble is that the 'universal principles' are drawn from his own worldview position, which is anything but Christian.

### Seven Things You Didn't Know About Covey

In addition to the 7 Habits series, Covey has also written, The Divine Center, which is only available from Mormon bookshops, and is a classic text on contemporary Mormon discipleship. This is orthodox, mainstream Mormonism, drawing on the full range of Mormon writings and showing the foundations of his Mormon worldview:

1. As a Mormon he believes that we're all born with a divine embryo within us.
2. The aim of human life is for us to become fully god and then to procreate, giving birth to more god-embryos. "As man now is, god once was; as god is now, man may become."
3. We become gods by achieving perfection in our lives, encouraging the divine in us to overcome our imperfect humanity.
4. Our own failure to become gods through self-perfection renders us as nothing more than worthless beasts.
5. Self-perfection is an individual occupation, there is no help from God.
6. God has given wisdom, or natural laws and 'principles', to all mankind to help them grow more divine, but only

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those with access to Mormon teaching will ever understand how these principles work,

7. Jesus Christ is not the literal Son of God, but like us was born with a divine embryo, and worked out how to achieve self-perfection before anyone else.

There you have it, the Covey worldview, the social paradigm within which Covey wants to define good, and within which he wants to tell his readers how to live. A world in which individual self-perfection is the route towards salvation, or fulfilment of all that means to be truly human (and truly divine).

The Divine Center of Covey's title becomes a pun. Yes, he wants to see the Mormon god at the centre of people's lives, but only because he believes the self to be a latent Mormon god. Hence, his divine centre is in reality a self-centre. Covey's Mormonism leads clearly to a self-orientated bid to secure one's own salvation through self-righteousness. This is the worldview he imports into the ever more successful 7 Habits.

Covey makes it quite clear that what he believes is fundamentally opposed to Christianity, saying that the Christian gospel is heresy and the Bible a distorted version of Mormon truth. His underlying perspective on life, humanity and God therefore could not be farther removed from Christianity if he tried.

## A Different Worldview

- Christianity sees us as created by God as human not divine, made in His likeness, not in His exact replication.
- The Christian life is lived for God's glory rather than our own, and our happiness comes from knowing Him<sup>1</sup>.
- What will bring ultimate joy to us will be to meet our Lord face to face without fear, secure in the knowledge of salvation through Christ.
- Our sinfulness places us well beyond the scope of God's perfection, and our salvation lies purely in the hands of our God.
- Our destiny is not to become the centre of our own little self-theistic universe but rather to worship the one true God at the centre of His.
- Our lives are lived with a growing sense of what God's goodness is; a growing desire to be like Him; and, most probably, a growing recognition of exactly how far short of righteousness we fall.
- Failure, repentance, faith, acceptance, grace and obedience are the motifs of Christian flourishing, not self-perfection.

## Christian Character

If there is something for Christians to learn from the 'character ethic' we need to be careful how we use it. We don't want to find ourselves inadvertently stuck with a theology of salvation by works – salvation is by grace and

faith alone. Yet, at the same time, we do want to live lives and do works which are increasingly pleasing to God, and we hope for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in restoring our character<sup>2</sup>. This sanctification is double barreled, including both the saving action of Christ on the cross, and our conformity with God's will through obedience to Christ<sup>3</sup>.

Christians see the goal of life as salvation in Christ, allowing them to enter into the very presence of God as perfect and sinless human beings, a goal achievable only by the intervening grace of God Himself. The desire of our present existence is, then, to live in a way which pleases God, not for ever in fear of failing to make the grade for divinity, but living in joy that God has himself given us the grade, despite our failure. Of course, we can develop godly and helpful habits, just as Aristotle and Covey have said, but these habits will be reflective of the love of God shown in scripture and in the Church. They are habits which we can take into the not-yet-believing world to act as signposts directing others towards Christ<sup>4</sup>.

## The Treadmill of Self-Perfecting

In The Divine Center, Covey explains to his readers how they must work hard at conveying Mormon truth to the non-Mormon world in de-Mormonised language, disguising its true significance. This is the very reason for his lifestyle management work. He aims to pull people onto the treadmill of self-perfecting that is at the heart of his religion, but to do so through the common language of effectiveness, happiness and fulfilment. This is perhaps the chief habit of highly effective management gurus: to make me believe that I alone am the answer to all my problems. To show how technique and attitude will allow me to transform my life from inconsequentiality to vibrant purpose-driven fulfilment. To show how bright the future is with me at the centre of my universe.

Covey's emphasis on self-improvement and human flourishing is not drawn from an understanding of us as the image of God, but rather a misrepresentation of us as gods ourselves. Not a divinity which lies at the centre of creation, but rather a divinity at the centre of our being. In our world obsessed with self, this self-idolatry holds great appeal, but the Christian emphasis, both corporately and privately, must be constantly seeking to rediscover God – Father, Son and Spirit – at the centre of all things.

A large number of Christians have read 7 Habits and claim its usefulness. In truth, there is some helpful stuff about time management and about focus on priorities, but nothing which cannot be learned elsewhere. The pitfalls of getting

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drawn into Covey's way of thinking far outweigh its advantages, because at its heart lies heresy. A life lived wholly by this book will never look the same as a life lived wholly by God's book. The onus must be on Christian readers and teachers to find adequate ways of explaining how God's Word helps us address issues of living a meaningful, God-centred life in an increasingly busy world.

### **A Final Note on Success Books**

Two recent books by Christians have stepped into Covey's territory: *The Heart of Success* by Rob Parsons and *The 7 Laws of Spiritual Success* by Selwyn Hughes. Parsons' book shares Covey's emphasis on establishing your priorities, and like Covey, he removes explicit reference to a value system. Indeed, though Parsons' own worldview is strongly Christian the book appears as general wisdom rather than something clearly drawn from scripture. As such, Parsons' 'habits' may help us but they don't help us understand the Biblical 'why'. Hughes' book has a number of useful ideas relating to general Christian discipleship, filtered through a transparent plagiarism of Covey's work, but it lacks any cutting edge in its application to the hard balances of working life. The first does not point to Christ, while the other fails to help people get their life balance better sorted. Furthermore, their acquiescence to the cultural infatuation with success runs the risk of producing churches full of individualised Christians who view their salvation and material prosperity in terms of self-satisfying competition. Churches like this have no doubt existed since Corinth or Philippi, but the radical call to Christians at all times is to shun the language of success and replace it with the language of humility, compassion, love and obedience<sup>5</sup>.

### **Resources**

- *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey, Simon & Schuster, 1999, £10.99
- *The 7 Laws of Spiritual Success*, Selwyn Hughes, CWR, 2002, £7.99
- *The Heart of Success*, Rob Parsons, Hodder & Stoughton, 2002, £ 6.99
- See book reviews and the article on Success at [www.graduateimpact.com](http://www.graduateimpact.com)

### **References**

1. Westminster Longer Catechism Item 1.
2. Romans 5:3-5
3. 1 Peter 1:1-2
4. 1 Peter 2:11-12
5. Philippians 2:1-10