

Book Review

Beyond Busyness

Time Wisdom for Ministry

Stephen Cherry

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This is a wonderful little book. Read it.

Stephen Cherry combines multiple roles in his ministry in Durham, and writes about one of the obvious pressures of ministry in today's world: the pressures of time. In response, he offers what he calls 'time wisdom' as an alternative to 'time management'. Without disparaging the latter, at least not entirely, he suggests that disciplines of time wisdom allow the minister to move beyond busyness by digging down to what causes it, rather than just settling for managing it.

The format of the book is engaging: 28 short sessions arranged in six sections, usually two or three pages in length, and offering interactive tasks for reflection. Between each section comes some kind of meditation or liturgical response. Thus this is an intensely *practical* book. Cherry has clearly read much contemporary literature on time and its pressures (and one or two points chime particularly with things he quotes from Eugene Peterson), and he cites Augustine's famous point about knowing what time is until someone asks you to define it, but this is a book which wears its learning lightly. It is fundamentally concerned with the ways in which ministers (though doubtless many others too) allow themselves to be mastered by busyness.

Busyness, he says bluntly, is a disease. Find alternative language to say what you mean when you respond 'I'm busy': it will help to train the mind differently. My favourite piece of advice in the book is to ignore anything marked 'URGENT'. But other practically-orientated gems abound: if you cannot make use of small segments of time for progress on a task it is highly unlikely you will get the task done just by clearing large amounts of time in your diary; do not tell people what is in your diary, just allow your diary to tell you whether you are free or not; time both is and is not money; make a 'Don't Do It' list ... The practical advice begins with a reflection on saying 'No'. If one cannot do this, none of the rest of the book will probably make any difference. When was the last time you said 'No'? Cherry puts the question

bluntly, and as with many chapters I found myself needing to reflect – somewhat uncomfortably – on how well he had pinpointed a habit I had allowed to develop.

He does eventually get on to techniques to improve one's use of time. He has brief chapters on 'clumping' (bundling together activities of a common theme or location); 'clearing' (extended time for serious attentive thinking); and 'threading' (putting in regular diary slots for a major activity). Also, of course, 'listing', which he tackles from many angles. Most basic is the suggestion to divide 'to do' lists into 'Must Do' and 'May Do'. But all of these practical sections are really built around a far more profound and searching analysis of why we let our thinking go awry and treat time as if it were a problem to be solved. On page 66 he finally admits 'Nothing is going to solve the problem of time. ... The solution to the problem of time is to realise that time is not a problem.' Through a succession of parables, images, and practices to cultivate, Cherry instead offers a way to think and live differently.

Finally, the style throughout is open and engaging. Cherry is aware that there are always going to be exceptional periods when one's best practices get submerged by factors beyond one's control. He just doesn't think that that needs to happen as often as many people let it.

There is real wisdom here, of a wonderfully calming kind. May this book find many readers, and contribute to time wisdom in the church.

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