Contents

Chapter 1

Practicing the Present

I've reached the stage in life where it feels like I have more time behind me than in front of me. I know this isn't really true. I am a pilgrim wending my way toward a destination where time as I now experience it will have no meaning. I know this as a point of faith. But my day-to-day experience is something else. Where my ordinary life is concerned, it feels as if time is passing too quickly. I am like a driver who is running out of road, and it makes me wonder why I was in such a hurry to begin with.

An old hymn says, "Time, like an ever rolling stream, / Bears all its sons away." I know exactly what the hymn writer means. It is as if I am floating down a river, watching the trees along the bank. It is easy to think that I am the one who is stationary and everything else around me is moving. But I know better. Everything is in motion. The world in its present form is passing away, and so am I (see 1 Cor. 7:31).

For much of my life, I have been able to ignore this fact. Like most people, my interests and aspirations have been

skewed toward the future. I have prayed for it, planned for it, and expended most of my effort trying to put it into effect. When I was not focusing on the future, I was dwelling on the past. Sometimes merely recalling it, more often brooding about it. In the process, I have learned an important lesson: the future never really arrives. The days marked on the calendar eventually do come to pass. The plans I make may come to fruition or else fail. Yet as far as my experience goes, I remain firmly rooted in the present. What is the future but the now that we have not yet come to know? Likewise, the past is merely a succession of presents that we have left behind.

My training as a leader taught me to focus mostly on the future. I thought my main goal should be to help the church become what it was not. Once our goals were met, I felt it was my job to find new goals and aim for those. Whatever we were doing could be done better. No matter how many were in attendance, we should always aim for more. More people, more programs, and more projects—I never felt as though we were quite what we should be. I thought I was "casting vision." Until one day, I read an article about the importance of saying thank you to the congregation and realized that most of my statements about the church from the pulpit tended to dwell on what we weren't doing. Instead of acknowledging what we were doing well, I usually pointed out our weaknesses. I thought I was being prophetic. The article helped me to realize that I was just being unappreciative.

Why was it so difficult for me to say thank you? It

was because I was disappointed. I thought my gifts were better suited for a different kind of church. I made it my mission to transform the congregation into the church I really wanted to serve. But when I started saying thank you, something changed. Not only did the church seem relieved, but I began to see the church differently. God was at work. People were growing in their faith. Certainly, there were areas where we could improve. But learning to say thank you helped me see what God was doing in the present.

Scattered in Time

It can be just as distracting to dwell on the past. If most church leaders have a bias toward the future, church members tend to look in the other direction. This is especially true of churches with a storied past. The longer the church's history, the greater the possibility that church members will view the present through the lens of what used to be. Usually, this takes the form of a narrative that is implicitly critical of the church that begins with the words, "I remember . . ." This vision of the past is bathed in golden hues, even when we are thinking of the trials that accompanied those days. That's because most of the sharp edges have been worn down by time and forgetfulness. The sermons were better in those days, the services fuller, and the church's ministries more effective.

The same thing can happen on a more personal level. We can become so absorbed with the past that it robs us of any pleasure that might come from the present. Maybe it's

the memory of our own personal "glory days" that leaves us feeling that our life peaked years ago and it's all downhill from there. It could be the memory of a great mistake that fills us with so much regret that we carry the weight of it into the present. Or our minds may be fixed on some past trauma so that we live through it again and again in our memory.

Yet the more we reflect upon the past, the more illusory it becomes. That is because we are not merely recalling but recollecting. We sort through fragments of our past experiences the way an archeologist sifts the debris of an ancient civilization. Instead of bits of broken pottery, we handle shards of memory. These are not solid artifacts. They are ghosts, echoes of past perception. When we share them with others, we discover our perceptions do not always square with those of others. They remember things differently. Many times, these differences involve more than facts. They have to do with the experiences themselves. How is it possible that the same event that leaves me feeling so scarred years or even decades later was forgotten by others in a matter of minutes?

The future is equally illusive because it involves an imagined construction of a reality that does not yet exist. When God speaks of the future, we can be sure that it will come to pass. But when He does speak of it in Scripture, He usually does so by means of images and figures. Scripture offers a broad outline of what is to come and includes a few glimpses of that reality through the mist. But it never

really provides us with a photograph or a detailed map. The Father's house has many rooms (John 14:2), but we do not know how they are decorated.

"I have been scattered in times I do not understand," St. Augustine complained. He saw his life as one that stretched in many directions at once. "My thoughts—the very inmost bowels of my soul—are torn to pieces in tumultuous vicissitudes, until that day when, purged and made liquid by the fire of Your love, I will flow into You."[1] The word that scholar Andrea Nightingale uses to characterize Augustine's view is "distended."[2] It is a good word because it conveys the notion that time is not only stretched between the past and the future, but also distorted.

Like Augustine's, our minds are scattered in time so that our interests range far beyond the present. At one moment, we peer intently into the past, hoping for the mists to clear and longing to catch a glimpse of a present that has disappeared from view. In the next, we skip far ahead, hoping to scout out the future and stake a certain claim. Unfortunately, the beauty and value of the present is often lost. We are here in body but not in mind. We are only halfhearted in our attention and sometimes in our service.

To the one whose interest is chiefly on the future, the present is only a way station. Its primary function is to serve as a staging ground for what comes next. For those whose focus is mostly on the past, the present becomes a cemetery filled with monuments to the glory days that will never come again or with a painful record of the injuries and slights we have suffered. For the future-oriented, the

past is a drag and the present an obstacle. Either way, the present is where we are but not where we want to stay.

Interestingly, C. S. Lewis saw both perspectives as strategies of Satan, pointing out that humans live in time but are destined for eternity. God wants us to attend to both. But this can happen only if we understand the importance of the present moment, which Lewis calls "the point at which time touches eternity."[3]

Speaking in the voice of the master tempter Screwtape, Lewis observes,

> Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them. He would therefore have them continually concerned either with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present—either meditating on their eternal union with, or separation from, Himself, or else obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure.[4]

Lewis notes further that between these two, the future is the least like eternity: "It is the most completely temporal part of time—for the Past is frozen and no longer flows, and the Present is all lit up with eternal rays."[5]

The Trouble with the Future

Not so long ago, it was common for many churches to spend hours writing vision statements. Pastors and church

boards labored to imagine a preferred future for their churches. That vision was captured in a sentence and pasted in the church bulletin. Some of us are still doing it. What is more, one person's vision of the future may reflect a different set of tastes, values, or expectations than another's. This is the fly in the ointment when it comes to ministry planning and what is often called "vision." What inspires pastors and church leaders is rarely what excites the average church member.

After several decades of reading these vision statements, I have come to three conclusions. First, they all sound pretty much the same. Church vision statements usually have something to do with worship, discipleship, and ensuring that people in the church are busy doing the church's work. They often employ hyperbolic language that promises more than the church actually delivers. Second, although their aim is to inspire, most vision statements are tedious in reality. My heart doesn't beat any faster when I read them. They don't make me say, "Yes, I want to be a part of that!" When I read them all I see is "blah, blah, blah, Jesus." Third, and perhaps most important, they are designed to create a culture of dissatisfaction with things as they are. The common assumption of these statements is that there is something deficient about the present. The future is where the real action is. The present is identified with the status quo, which is itself synonymous with stagnation and dead spirituality.

THE VISION THING

This is partly a reflection of context out of which vision statements arose. Vision statements did not really originate with the church, despite misguided appeals to the KJV translation of the first half of Proverbs 29:18: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." They come from the world of marketing. The mathematician and philosopher Archimedes is said to have declared, "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world." The lever of the marketer is advertising and its fulcrum is dissatisfaction. Media critic Jean Kilbourne observes, "Advertising creates a world view that is based upon cynicism, dissatisfaction and craving."[6] General Motors executive Charles Kettering famously observed that the key to economic prosperity is "the organized creation of dissatisfaction."[7]

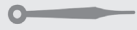
The basic message of the marketer is that we should *not* be content with what we have. You might think that the driving force in such an ethos would be satisfaction, but in reality, the opposite is true. Satisfaction has to do with one's needs. Robert and Edward Skidelsky explain the difference this way: "Needs—the objective requirements of a good and comfortable life—are finite in quantity, but wants, being

purely psychic, are infinitely expandable, as to both quantity and quality."[8] Paul's list of necessities is shocking in its brevity. According to 1 Timothy 6:8, food and clothing are sufficient. Our wants are something else. They are the things we desire but can live without. The reason they are infinitely expandable is because they are easily replaceable. Once our wants are achieved, they soon give way to other wants. The aim of the marketer is to convince me that my wants are needs. Marketing is effective because it creates within me a sense of dissatisfaction and inflames my desire for what I do not have.

Pastors and church leaders who employ marketing techniques to further the church's mission do not buy into the cynicism and craving that lies behind the culture of advertising. Indeed, they would argue that their aim is to introduce people to the only One who is able to provide ultimate satisfaction. They may employ the methods of the marketer but they reject the bankrupt values of advertising culture. This is fair. But Neil Postman's warning about tools also holds true for strategies and methods. Postman observes that no tool is ideologically neutral: "In every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another, to amplify one sense or skill or attitude more loudly than another."[9] The bias of leadership that focuses primarily on an unrealized and preferred future is that that future is emphasized at the expense of the present. Suppose the vision we have set for the church becomes a reality? What then? We will likely feel compelled to formulate a

new vision. In other words, the vision itself really doesn't matter. It is merely the carrot at the end of the stick that keeps us in motion. The result is an endless missional treadmill. We do not really expect to achieve our goal. Or if we do achieve it, we simply replace it with another goal. The main thing is to be fixed on the future and move toward it.

THE TREADMILL OF DESIRE



A vision can be a help when we are setting goals but it can also be a trap. Proverbs 27:20 warns, "Death and Destruction are never satisfied, and neither are human eyes." Ambition, like human desire, seems to be infinitely expandable. Once we have reached our goal, it is immediately replaced with another. At its best, ambition provides the energy we need to improve and accomplish. At its worst, it becomes an endless treadmill that only proves that we will never be satisfied no matter how much success we experience.

While ambition and desire are not automatically incompatible with the Christian life, they only concentrate our attention on what we lack. The first and fourth beatitude remind us that this is not necessarily a bad thing (Matt. 5:3, 6). But the Bible also counsels us to pursue contentment, noting that "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:6).

The church that is focused on some golden age in the past has a similar problem. But in this case, the church's attention is twice divided. It dwells on a past that will never return while at the same time trying to move toward a future that looks like the past. There is twice the incentive to dismiss the work that God is doing in the here and now. If we see His work, we are liable to scorn it. We become like those who wept when they compared the smaller second temple that was rebuilt in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah to the glory days of the temple of Solomon. Haggai 2:3 captures their disappointment: "Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?"

Whether we are focused on a future that never quite becomes a reality or are longing for a treasured past that will not return, the effect on our view of the present is the same. Both perspectives tend to marginalize the present. The present seems like nothing to us. I suppose we should not be surprised by this truth. The Christian faith has a vested interest in the future. The return of Christ is in the future. The ultimate fulfillment of all His promises about the kingdom will take place in the future. Our resurrection and final deliverance from our struggle with sin remains in the future. It is true that where the Christian is concerned the best is yet to come. Likewise our Christian faith has deep roots in the past. Our hope is grounded upon promises made long before we were born. The Bible on which we have staked our faith and our lives was written by and addressed to people who are now long dead. That same

Bible admonishes us to remember what we have received and heard, as well as to remember those who have believed before us (see Rev. 3:3; Heb. 13:7). Remembering is a fundamental discipline of the Christian life, and the primary reference point for those who remember is the past.

Paul's determination to forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead expressed in Philippians 3:13 seems to favor the future over both the past and the present. His admonition to the Ephesians that they should remember that they were once Gentiles separated from Christ and to the Thessalonians that they should recall what he was like when he was with them both show that he had a regard for the past (Eph. 2:11; 1 Thess. 2:9). Jesus said that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob "is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Luke 20:38). This makes Him the God of our past and of our future as much as He is the God of our present. He is the one who has promised and called in the past. His grace is the remedy for all our regret. His assurances are our guarantee and our hope for the future. But our experience with Him is always in the present.

God's ultimate purpose for us lies in the future, but His business with us is always in the present. He has left us a record of His faithfulness in the past, but that is so we can be confident of His dealings with us in the here and now. Satan's strategy is to distract us from the divine present by directing our attention either to a past that we can no longer effect or to a future that does not yet exist and may never come to pass. This may take the form of a dogged pursuit of the future, which leaves us blinded to

or dissatisfied with the present. Or it may be an obsession with the past, whether it is a longing for the glory days or an overwhelming sense of regret over decisions, actions, and experiences that we now cannot change. Each of these perspectives makes us vulnerable to the same error made by the people of Haggai's day. Either we will not see what God is doing in the present or we will note it and dismiss it as "nothing."

Practicing the Present

In this book, I propose an alternative. I call it "practicing the present." Practicing the present involves more than the habit of slowing down and making ourselves aware of what is going on in the moment. It is a way of locating ourselves in the world. It is a way of seeing. Practicing the present has Christian roots. Jesus warned His disciples, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt. 6:34). He taught us to ask the Father for our "daily" bread (Matt. 6:11). Jesus does not mean that we should ignore the future. But He does warn against the danger of being consumed with it. James has similar advice for those who are overconfident about the future: "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money,'" he warns. "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:13–14).

In his book *Beginning to Pray*, Anthony Bloom notes that one of the things we must learn to do if we are to pray well is to "establish ourselves in the present."[10] Bloom describes a process that helps beginners at prayer to orient themselves to the present. Bloom explains, "You sit down and say, 'I am seated, I am doing nothing, I will do nothing for five minutes,' and then relax, and continually throughout this time (one or two minutes is the most you will be able to endure to begin with) realise, 'I am here in the presence of God, in my own presence and in the presence of all the furniture that is around me, just still, moving nowhere.'"[11] This is an act in which we concentrate our attention both on the moment and on our immediate surroundings. We become aware of our senses. But more than that, we remind ourselves of the reality of God's immediacy and His presence. You might think this would be easier to do in a digital age. After all, don't our smartphones provide us with continual reminders to pay attention to the immediate? In reality, they often draw our attention away from our surroundings and those who are in them. How often have we seen two people seated in close proximity but ignoring each other while their faces are glued to a glowing screen? Worst of all, these devices make it difficult to concentrate on God's presence. They demand our immediate attention but hinder us from focusing on living in the present.

Bloom learned the importance of living in the present when he was fighting with the resistance movement in German-occupied France during World War II. He was caught by the police and realized that his life was in

jeopardy. Two things happened in that moment. First, he suddenly became very aware of the present. "For one thing, I began to think very quickly, feel very intensely, and to be aware of the whole situation with a relief and a colourfulness which I had never before perceived on the last steps of Metro Etoile."[12] Second, Bloom realized that he could not think about the past. He couldn't talk about his real past without being shot. The past he was prepared to talk about did not really exist. "I discovered that I was pressed into the present moment, and all my past, that is, all the things that could be, were condensed in the present moment with an intensity, a colourfulness that was extremely exhilarating and which allowed me eventually to get away!"[13]

People who live through a traumatic experience sometimes say that it is like an "out of body experience." But what Bloom describes sounds more like the opposite. Maybe what is really going on is that we are shocked out of our concerns about the past and the future and are suddenly fully absorbed in the present.

Those who practice the present try to do something similar but within the context of ordinary life. Instead of waiting for someone to put a gun to our head, we develop the habit of reining in our wandering mind and concentrating our attention on the present. This means, first of all, taking stock of things as they really are. What is the real landscape of my life? What do things really look like? We are doing more than assessing. We are trying to orient ourselves to reality. Those who dwell on the past and future are often living in a fantasy world. But God is at work in the

real world. As we take stock of things as they really are, we do so with an awareness that God is truly present no matter how mundane or how bleak the circumstances appear.

Consequently, we are looking for the evidence of God's presence in the present. Pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke observed that Jesus Christ "always lingers in the darkest places in the world."[14] But Jesus is equally present in the common places. Jesus was "a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" (Isa. 53:3). Yet He was also acquainted with the mundane. If the silence of the Bible is any indication, the bulk of Jesus' earthly life was spent living an ordinary life. Most of His first thirty years were spent living the same kind of life that anyone else might have lived. Jesus lived with His parents (Luke 2:51). He grew up in the village they called home. He learned a trade.

Those who practice the present take note of the fact that God dwells in the midst of the muck and mire of daily life. Just as Anthony Bloom taught those who are learning to pray to acknowledge that God is present in the room along with the furniture, those who practice the present must recognize God's presence in their circumstances just as they are. They must accept that they are "just still, moving nowhere." The aim is not to look for a solution to our problems or to position ourselves for future success. It is, as Psalm 46:10 says, to "be still, and know that I am God." This is a habit of self-reminder, not a feeling. We do not have to experience a sense of God's presence in order for it to be true. Yet once we acknowledge the reality of His presence, we are more likely to become aware of it.

Practicing the present does not ignore the future or the past. But it does view both with a measure of sanctified skepticism. Both can be an unhealthy refuge for those who are disappointed with their present. Practicing the present also demands that we rein in, as much as we are able, our ambition and our anxiety. Both are common to human experience, and each in their own way can blind us to the reality of God's presence. They can cause us to forget the One who has numbered the hairs of our head and who is really responsible for the effectiveness of what we do for Jesus. Both ambition and anxiety can cause us to take too much responsibility for the success or the failure of what we do. Like Paul, we must refuse to judge ourselves (1 Cor. 4:3). When we are tempted to draw conclusions about what we see, we remind ourselves that our location in the present does not give us enough perspective to accurately weigh what we have done. When the Lord comes, "He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God" (1 Cor. 4:5).

In his memoir *Open Secrets*, Richard Lischer describes his experience as pastor of a small rural church in central Illinois. One night during his first week, the phone rang at three o'clock in the morning. The parishioner on the other end was a man named Ed whose wife Doral's gallbladder had ruptured. "It ain't good. It ain't good at all," he told Lischer. "We're goin' to have surgery in thirty, forty minutes. We need you here—if you can."[15] Lischer dressed quickly in his clerical garb and rushed along back roads through the

darkness to the hospital. He found Ed and Doral waiting in a laundry alcove next to the operating room. "I wasn't sure what was expected of me," Lischer writes. "If there was a ritual for this sort of situation, I didn't know it."[16]

At first, the three just stood huddled together in fear and silence. At a loss for words of his own, Lischer turned to the familiar script of the liturgy. "The Lord be with you," he said. "And with thy spirit," Ed and Doral replied in unison. "Lift up your hearts," Lischer said. "We lift them to the Lord," they answered.

There, in the dim light of the alcove, God showed up. "The Lord assumed his rightful place as Lord of the Alcove, and the three of us wordlessly acknowledged the presence," Lischer writes. "That night the Spirit moved like a gentle breeze among us and created something ineffable and real."[17]

This seems to me to be a perfect example of life and ministry in the present tense. It is a matter of acknowledging the reality of God's presence in the rough-and-tumble of ordinary ministry. It is a matter of expecting God to show up, even in the fear and boredom of the hospital waiting room. It is the honest acceptance that, at least in some measure, the past is lost to us and the future is unattainable. I do not mean that time does not exist or that it does not matter. It does. We are moving through time. Yet as we make this journey, God is moving with us. He is always with us, and we are only ever in the present with Him.