Making the Most of the Times…
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Introduction

Students, faculty, staff and administration, distinguished guests and friends, I am delighted to have the opportunity to address you today. In reflecting on what might be helpful to say to start us off into another year of academic enquiry and learning, I have decided that perhaps it would be most fruitful if I speak to you about some challenges we face as a teaching and learning community that have been on my heart, but which we barely even talk about. Nevertheless they are affecting us more and more in our daily campus life.

Our scripture reading for today first reminds us that we are a special people to whom God has spoken not in parables, but plainly. We are truly blessed in that we have been given the very words of God, and by His grace, through His Spirit, the ears to hear. We are called therefore to respond in kind, to act as the people of God we are. In so doing, we ought to be making the most of our times. My title of course is a play on Ephesians 5:15-16 which reads in the English Standard Version, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” Indeed we should also be making the most of the times — the days — the cultural setting in which we find ourselves — because the days, or the times, are evil. In each cultural period, the Christian community faces new cultural challenges, and faithful discipleship involves different kinds of cultural confrontations. In a sense, in every age it is necessary to identify what threatens the faithful practice of our faith in order to resist simply being conformed to the forces of this world. Rather we are called to submit to God who can transform us by renewing our minds in the face of each new cultural shift.

We live in perilous times, and we may not even know it. I am not talking about the threat of terrorism, or global warming, or another hurricane Katrina, or any of the other big stories we read about regularly in the news. Rather I want to talk about seemingly innocuous cultural pressures, that actually appear to represent good and interesting cultural progress that we generally take for granted. These pressures come from our everyday life as we know it; not that each element of progress is bad in itself, but the changes each introduces accumulate to produce a collective effect that pushes our culture and lifestyle towards a direction that can undermine the life of the Christian community. You perhaps have heard the story of what happens if you put a frog in a pan of water and slowly heat it up. Even to the point of boiling, the frog will simply not notice until it is too late, thereby happily becoming froggy soup. Many of us are like that frog in our present-day technological cultural pressure.
As we all know, technology is advancing at a rapid pace, and every day new developments portend wonderful promises. Nowadays we can make computers so small we can carry them in our pockets, providing access to mind-boggling amounts of information right at our fingertips, and giving us instant access to practically everyone else on the planet. We have whole new ways of diagnosing and addressing maladies, even including sending tiny cameras through our bodies to report back from the inside. We can tag our pets with chips implanted that are so small so as to go unnoticed, so that we always know where they are. Perhaps we will soon be tagging our children. Soon we may also be able to shop by simply walking through the checkout with our items, and the sensors will record the tagged merchandise and automatically charge it to the tagged credit card we wave. With the genetic revolution, we have now mapped the human genome with the promise of dealing with multiple genetic diseases. These all seem like exciting prospects, yet each new frontier brings new challenges and ethical dilemmas.

But I do not wish to talk about such obvious technological advances. Rather I want to speak to you about the more subtle pressures arising from our cultural use of this ever more amazing and promising technology that continues to be developed. The promise of technology was supposed to be that it would alleviate our lives of tedious tasks that could be performed by machines or computers or robots. But in the face of our ever increasing busy-ness the promise seems an empty one. There are pressures we need to be aware of, and as a college, in particular as a Christian college, we need to be ever vigilant as to how we might respond. We need a strategy that will help us avoid the pitfalls, while making the most of the times.

Four Tyrannies

To illustrate some of the pressures we face, I would like to briefly comment on what I call four tyrannies that weigh us down; tyrannies that tend to dehumanize us and can cause us to lose our effectiveness as Christians. I call these the tyranny of the efficient, the tyranny of the possible, the tyranny of the urgent, and the tyranny of the self-indulgent.

Tyranny of the Efficient

The first tyranny is what I call the tyranny of the efficient. Efficiency has become one of our modern-day cultural idols. It is the focus of business, of advertising, of personal growth, fitness, and indeed, of being a student. One might even say that, in a certain sense, efficiency is now perceived as a Christian virtue. Let’s recall the ESV version of Eph. 5:15-16 we read earlier: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” This can easily be taken (and often is taken) to imply that we need to use our time as efficiently as possible. As one faculty member recently quipped, when we think of making the best use of the time, we think of Christian day planners. But is this verse really telling us that? It is first helpful to turn to the more literal King James Version which reads, “redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” The verb being used here literally means “redeeming” or “buying back”. In fact this phrase is an idiom that is appropriately translated in the New International Version as, “making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (NIV). The
focus is whenever an opportunity for the good comes along, we should take advantage of it. Therefore it is not talking so much about saving time for its own sake, to increase productivity for example, as much as it is talking about the aim of what that time is used for, to promote what is good.

Paul develops a related idea in 1 Cor. 7:29-31 where he says “What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.” In other words, we are living in a dying world, and we should not put too much focus on “the things of the world” or the things of our present cultural setting, because these things will ultimately be replaced by a new heavens and a new earth. It is our time here that is short, in comparison with all eternity, in comparison with the kingdom we long for. When we consider this long term perspective, it throws a different light on our obsession with efficiency. In fact, the emphasis on efficiency alone ironically tends to accomplish just the opposite. It typically leads us to focus on accomplishing as much as we can in this world rather than on building for the next, forgetting the greater goal for which we are called to make the most of opportunities. We tend to shortchange the big picture of God’s calling for the church in favor of the short-term, for the smaller goal of the next moment, the next economic report, the next report card, the next item on the to-do list. The idol of efficiency also has a tendency to dehumanize us as people; to focus on productivity, on the end results, rather than on what happens to individuals in the process. To the extent that we serve the idol of efficiency in our studies, in our preparation for the future, in our relationships, and even in our running of the college on many levels, we may well be missing the big picture of who we are, and what we are called to be in our times. Efficiency therefore can paradoxically undermine our efforts to be good Christian stewards of our time, and of the times.

**Tyranny of the Possible**

The next tyranny on my list is what I call the tyranny of the possible. With so much information at our fingertips, and so many activities available, it creates the illusion that the choices of paths to take are boundless. But since everything is available all at once, it explodes our notion of human limits — thus leaving us confused because we have so much to choose from — and since we no longer know our limits, we no longer know where to stop. This can lead to over-commitment, quick excursions into various kinds of experiences, at the expense of quality, deeper reflection, and quietness. Quantity replaces quality. True life-transforming knowledge is replaced by distraction and diversions. Paradoxically, this can lead to a certain sort of passivity; there is so much out there that we may think we are accomplishing something merely by being receptacles of information, without responding in wisdom. It is kind of an irony that with so much coming at us, it seems we are doing something by just observing, by adding bits of knowledge to our knowledge store, but nevertheless by being passive. A mindset geared toward continuous absorption of information breeds the paradox of the loss of true wonder about life and the world. An abstract screen
of endless possibilities replaces true engagement with reality. The possible replaces the real. This is a central paradox of our times.

I am reminded of a recent Dilbert comic where his “pointy haired boss” is telling Catbert his new strategy for management: “I’ve decided to manage by spreadsheet. I’ll track things until all of our problems fix themselves.” Sometimes this is the way we react to life in general, being satisfied to keep track of all that is going on, perhaps with our friends through Facebook, or in the wider world through CNN, or ESPN, without actually going beyond making a few more unfocused comments on someone’s blog, without really entering into positive engagement with the issues. I think you can see the danger in such an attitude; by being involved with everything, we become doers of nothing. We become easily distracted, we lose our focus. We lose our humanity. For the over achievers, this leads to anxiousness and stress; for the passive responders to neglect of duty.

Of equal concern is what instant communication has done to the quality of that communication. As everyone knows who was here before “electronic bulletin boards”, the recently re-renamed Wittenberg Door (which was the Floor) is a far cry from what it once was when it was a real wooden door where you could tack on a message. Rather than thoughtful reflective position papers, all we have now are sound bites. Electronic communication tends to encourage sound bites, while by contrast there is a place in human interaction for in depth reflection written on real pieces of paper on real bulletin boards, where real people gather and discuss issues face to face; rather than disembodied faceless conversations where responsibility disappears the moment the screen switches to something else. The virtual world of possibilities makes it easy to live vicariously, leaving our responsibilities in the realm of mere virtual expression. As we spend more and more of our time removed from actions in the real world, we are also eroding our sense of Kingdom involvement and responsibility. Ironically, and somewhat related, because of what is now possible using computers, our written work takes on a perfectionistic direction in print appearance, sometimes while neglecting the substance.

**Tyranny of the Urgent**

The third tyranny is the tyranny of the urgent.\(^1\) This is a tyranny that is derived from the expectations of others, and is amplified by technology. The problem here is largely that with the capability of instant communication comes the inevitability of more communication accompanied by the inherent expectation of instant response. We are expected to live constantly at the edge of the possible. This is like asking everyone to run at the speed of the last olympic record pace. After all, when you have a project due next week, or I have a lecture to prepare for next month, and we sit down at our computers and find thirty emails, twelve of which ask (or demand) us to do something, there is a hidden implication that said tasks should be accomplished as soon as possible. Small tasks with someone else’s deadline can eat up large and more fruitful tasks that could be completed over a longer term. Have you ever wondered why we no longer build grand cathedrals? I think part of

\(^1\)The name of this tyranny is taken from the pamphlet *Tyranny of the Urgent*, by Charles E. Hummel, InterVarsity Press (1994), where there are further suggestions for response. It is often stocked in the Tuck Shop.
it is rooted in this tyranny, that all our constructions are needed urgently; we no longer are willing to wait decades to look forward to the payoff, which would possibly only be for subsequent generations. Before instant twenty-four hour a day communication, our ‘work’ expectation was limited more to the real time it takes to do things. In the environment of instant possibility, time itself has become virtual, as our expectations of job accomplishment become distorted. The real time work pace and a virtual work pace have become confused. Time has shrunk—the speed of virtual reality has increasingly taken over the speed of real time actions. In the midst of all the rush, the time to be still and know that God is the Lord is becoming a rare commodity.

**Tyranny of the Self-Indulgent**

Finally I would like to speak about the tyranny of the self-indulgent. If information is at our fingertips, so are the possibilities for entertainment, which are endless. The cultural and moral war used to be “out there” but now the war has come to us. It is here, on our computer screens, in our pockets, in our hearts and minds. Every day when you get up, it is a new day of battle, confronting culture, but the culture is not out there; it is inside us. It is now in our habits and in our expectations. It can look benign but it will erode us from within. Being accustomed to being entertained has the effect that at any given moment many of us tend to follow what we feel like doing more often than to look at the big picture of life and of time. The notion “epic everyday” has been made popular by Covenant’s Third Lobby; but many of us are really living the “entertainment everyday” model instead, alluded to by Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves To Death.* But amusing ourselves is living toward sideshows rather than playing for the King. Indeed there are many temptations, and the more that are accessible at our fingertips — so much the worse. With the internet you no longer have to go out and look for ways to sin; they come to you where you are. And this comes at a time in cultural history when society as a whole emphasizes giving in to desires. Even home-schooling is no longer the safeguard from the culture it once was, if there is easy access to everything all the time. The culture is at our fingertips at every moment; and it is affecting our hearts.

**Responses**

Now of course I can suggest responses to each of these tyrannies, some of which are pretty obvious.

For example, concerning the tyranny of efficiency, we need to start by being aware of the problem, and as a community to begin to ask where it is affecting us adversely. Rather than focusing on the end products of grades, honors, jobs, etc. we should be focusing on the process of learning and growing, thereby restoring our humanity, our spirituality; living in time rather than living for the end product.

To the tyranny of the possible, we should recognize our limitations. We should give ourselves over to prayer concerning which things to pursue and which things to pass up in order to make our kingdom work more fruitful. And we should submit ourselves to

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discipline. This takes wisdom, and sometimes repentance.

To the tyranny of the urgent, we need to ask ourselves whether the things coming at us are really more urgent than the long term goals, and we need to be able to offer a reasonable no in the face of demands. More importantly, the golden rule applies. If our behavior when multiplied to many others would present a burden on those from whom we are making demands, we need to reconsider our actions. We need to submit the ‘urgent’ to the necessary, to the big picture of God’s reign in all things. Let us foster a community of restraint, where we rarely unwittingly put unnecessary and seemingly urgent burdens on others which could be avoided. In God’s sovereignty, His sense of timing is not ours. What seems urgent is defined by the moment, by the present state of things; in God’s timing, what is urgent is what is eternally significant. And what is eternally significant is never convenient, fast or easy. It calls for sacrificing the present for the sake of the long-term.

The tyranny of the self-indulgent is perhaps the most egregious. To face this tyranny, we really do have to look inside ourselves. It is easy to think of the enemy as out there, in which case our marching orders would be to put on the armor of God and do battle. But now the enemy is attacking us where we are all the time; which means that in a greater sense than before, the enemy becomes ourself; and sadly all too often our hearts want to be distracted. So we become our own worst enemy. This is where we need the Lord’s discipline in order to focus on the big picture, redeeming the time. Because of the ever more subtle yet powerful and tempting distractions in our personal experience, we need to cultivate discipline on a personal level perhaps as never before in order to resist the cultural traps. This takes a true desire to please the creator rather than ourself the creature, and then a willingness to yield to the Holy Spirit in doing so.

But addressing these tyrannies is not the main point; they are only illustrative of the wider battle we face in this age. The cumulative effect of these tyrannies is the way our consciousness is fragmented, and has become disconnected from the bigger picture of God’s storytelling in our midst, from the kind of deep transformations we are called to within ourselves and within our Christian community. The remedy in a general way is to return constantly and habitually to that big picture as a reality check we have to perform, perhaps many times each day in the midst of our activities. We need to stop focusing on “the instant” information at our fingertips, and rather focus on living in the big picture, not expecting the world (of technology) to deliver but rather looking forward knowing that the God who is faithful will deliver in His own time. We should continually encourage one another to “live into” the big picture, so as not to fall prey to the habitual fragmentation of our day. To truly serve the King we need to teach it more thoroughly to our hearts. We must also continually remind one another of the grand cosmic metanarrative that we are servants of the one true King and He is preparing a better place for us. Indeed, we are a kingdom of priests, and we should be offering ourselves as living sacrifices unto the King who has bought us, rather than letting our new-found technologies master our lives. As kings, we are called to master and to steward wisely even these technological resources which should be our tools, and not the masters of our time and our life-styles.

Perhaps we ought to make the most of our mountaintop by fostering some of the monastic quietness and focus that monks in a medieval monastery might have shared. In
any case, let us make this a year of reflection and cultural renewal on our campus, a year in which we at least begin to dialog about the subtle cultural burdens that we have begun to bear, but so far have largely ignored, so that we can truly “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and . . . run with perseverance the race marked out for us . . . fix[ing] our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebr. 12:1-2).

How shall we make the most of our time? and make the most of the times? Those are the questions which I hope will follow us individually and as a community as we enter this school year of busy-ness, but with all the opportunities it brings. May each and every one of you have a great and wonderful year of learning, teaching, working, and mutual edification in service to our marvelous King.

Thank you.

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