HOW TO INHABIT TIME

UNDERSTANDING THE PAST, FACING THE FUTURE,

LIVING FAITHFULLY NOW

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INTRODUCTION

When Are We?
The Spiritual Significance of Timekeeping

That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

—Ecclesiastes 3:15

When I didn’t know where else to turn; when the cloud of depression had enveloped me and my loved ones; when all I seemed to do was rage, my shouts like some misguided attempt at sonar location from the fog; when the thoughts of ending it all became too frequent—then, finally, humbled if not humiliated, I entered the counselor’s office. I didn’t even know what to ask.

I recall an early exercise. “Draw me a map of your childhood house,” he suggested. With years of hindsight now, I can see this was an invitation to orient myself, to get my bearings. I came in lost, disoriented, and the mapping exercise was an invitation for me, blind, to reach out my hands and feel my
way to some landmarks, the way you feel your way through a house in the dark.

What he couldn’t have known was how many years of my childhood I had dreamed of being an architect. Just picking up a pencil to draw brought back a rush of muscle memories. My high school drafting classes came back to my hand like riding a bike. I remembered instantly how to mark the doors and windows, even how to do those perfect, simple arrowheads that mark dimensions. I’m gaining control, confidence. I’m thinking, “I’ve been here before.”

But my soul is now back in that split-level home on Snakes Trail Road where our family fell apart. Here’s the massive garage where my father built his hot rods and repaired snowmobiles. Down the stairs, in the basement, wood-paneled with a tiny window, is the room where I felt terrified by my father when I was eleven. In the rec room, near the bar and the hi-fi with its 8-tracks, is the blue flowered couch where our parents told us it was over and that we—my mother, brother, and I—would be leaving. Upstairs are the two bedrooms that used to be ours but are now occupied by his mistress’s children, all signs of our being there erased.

“All houses have memory,” writes David Farrier. “Every house is a clock.” I’m drawing a map but inhabiting a history. This looks like cartography but is actually archaeology. If every house is a clock, this floor plan is a timeline. This isn’t a structure “out there” on a dirt road in southern Ontario; this is the house in me. This isn’t a clock I carry in my pocket, but more like a time bomb that’s been tick, tick, ticking in my soul for thirty years.

I can draw this house with my eyes closed. I am mapping every windowsill, picturing closets, placing the furniture, recalling the way light settled on the sunken living room. My map ventures outside to the yard: here’s the sandbox by the garden
that spills onto the massive hill that was a dream for our tobog-gans. There’s the path along the cornfield to the woods where we spent countless hours building forts. There’s Mud Creek, with that curious bit of sandy “beach” where my friends and I talked about which of Charlie’s Angels was most beautiful. This is a map of the field of dreams that was my childhood until it wasn’t.

We usually think of disorientation as a matter of being dis-placed, a confusion about where one is. You know the clichéd film scene: someone awakes from a trauma and asks, “Where am I?” But disorientation can be temporal too. When “time is out of joint,” as Hamlet put it, we are dislocated. You awake some morning in a strange haze of barely awareness, and it takes several beats to remember what day it is. Depending on how many beats intervene, anxiety arises from a temporal vertigo. There are many ways to be disoriented by time, like the glitch of déjà vu or the time warp of going home again. Sometimes we default to a spatial question for what is, at root, temporal disorientation. When I experience that early morning tempo-ral fog, I might be asking myself, “Where am I?” even if the unvoiced question, though grammatically strange, should be, “When am I?”

Now consider a different kind of disorientation: someone who doesn’t even realize they’re lost because they are so confident they know where they are, like the stereotypical dad who blithely forges on in the wrong direction, more confident in his sense of direction than the road atlas in his wife’s hands. Or, more terrifying, the image of Lieutenant Dike in Band of Brothers, whose misplaced confidence in his sense of orienta-tion leads to senseless death. This disorientation stems from a
delusion, whether of naivete or hubris, of imagining they are above it all, and especially above correction.

There is a kind of temporal dislocation akin to such unrecognized disorientation. I’m thinking of a kind of temporal disorientation that is unrecognized because it’s buried and hidden by the illusion of being above the fray, immune to history, surfing time rather than being immersed and battered by its waves. Such temporal disorientation stems from the delusion of being “nowhen,” unconditioned by time. Those who imagine they inhabit nowhen imagine themselves wholly governed by timeless principles, unchanging convictions, expressing an idealism that assumes they are wholly governed by eternal ideas untainted by history. They are oblivious to the deposits of history in their own unconscious. They have never considered the archaeological strata in their own souls. They live as if hatched rather than born, created ex nihilo rather than formed by a process. They don’t realize that the homes that formed them were clocks. They can’t hear the ticking. Where such an eternal nowhen rules, time doesn’t matter.

This temporal delusion characterizes too much of Christianity and too many Christians (and not a few Americans).

When the human cerebellum is injured or ill, whether through trauma or disease or genetic inheritance, a curious condition can arise: dyschronometria, an inability to keep time. Lacking a reliable internal clock, the person suffering from dyschronometria becomes lost in a temporal fog. They lack any sense of the passage of time, the psychological tick-tock that guides us in a day. A minute feels the same as an hour; hours bleed into a blur.

This distorted time perception can go unnoticed, yet be dangerous and debilitating. For example, a person suffering
from dementia who manifests dyschronometria will have no awareness of having already taken their pills and thus take them again. Or a parent who has suffered brain trauma may lose track of time, become derailed and disoriented, and constantly struggle to remember to pick up children from school. For someone suffering from dyschronometria, their temporal life has no texture. Like a flat winter plain under cloudy skies, time is an expanse without ripple or shadow. Nothing is distinct.

A lot of contemporary Christianity suffers from spiritual dyschronometria—an inability to keep time, a lack of awareness of what time it is. Too many contemporary Christians look at history and see only a barren, textureless landscape. We might think of this as the temporal equivalent of color blindness—a failure to appreciate the nuances and dynamics of history. We can’t discern why *when* makes a difference. We don’t recognize how much we are the products of a past, leading to naivete about our present. But we also don’t know how to keep time with a promised future, leading to fixations on the “end times” rather than cultivating a posture of hope.

This temporal tone deafness is a feature of the view from nowhen that characterizes too much of contemporary Christianity. We think biblical ideas are timeless formulas to be instituted anywhere and everywhere in the same way. While we rightly entrust ourselves to a God who is the same today, yesterday, and forever, we mistakenly imagine this translates into a one-size-fits-all approach to what faithfulness looks like. We are blind to our own locatedness, geographically, historically, temporally. Even expressions of Christianity that seem to be fixated on time and history are, ironically, nowhen renditions of the faith that believe they are above time and history because they’ve been granted access to a God’s-eye view of it all.

When I first became a Christian in my late teens, my entrée to the faith was through a sect that invented what we now call

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“dispensationalism”—a way of reading the Bible, spawned in the nineteenth century, that is fixated on reading history in light of the end times. John Nelson Darby, Charles Scofield, and others discerned epochs or “dispensations” of history in their curious (and innovative) reading of the Bible that had everyone looking for the rapture, worried about being left behind. As an eager student of the Bible, I drank up this esoteric insider knowledge of both history and the future. All of it was embodied, for me, in a visual aid that dominated the basement of that tiny chapel in Tavistock, Ontario. Hovering over every Bible study was a massive, wall-sized version of one of Clarence Larkin’s famous charts that mapped the sweep of human history (a whole “7,000 years” according to Larkin) while also mapping out what was to come.

Like a schematic diagram of the history of creation, Larkin charts the dramatic sweep of time between the parentheses of two eternities. Almost the entirety of history is assigned to a long era of degeneration. What the future holds is an escape from time. The rest is countdown. (At the time of my conversion, a tract was making its rounds spelling out “88 Reasons for 1988.”)

On the one hand, this looks like a form of Christianity that is fascinated by history. But, in fact, the charts and predictions manifest a Christianity that believes it is above history. History is the regrettable grind of waiting, the churn of degeneration, the countdown of demise. Long chunks of history, including a long phase of Christianity between the death of the apostles and the momentous 1928 insights of John Nelson Darby, are devoid of the Spirit, eras of disillusion, superstition, and deception. Instead of discerning history, dispensationalism is a nowhen Christianity that mostly demonizes history.

Despite pretending to prioritize faithfulness, the spiritual dyschronometria of nowhen Christianities actually generates
unfaithful responses to the present. Let’s take just one glaring example. In the wake of systemic police brutality disproportionately inflicted on Black Americans, a movement swelled to rightly assert that “Black Lives Matter.” The assertion was necessary because of a distinct and particular history of oppression and exploitation, a history that was far from past. In the face of this, a number of white Christians were suddenly surprising purveyors of a universal human solidarity and, against the supposedly selective or narrow protest that “Black Lives Matter,” asserted that “All Lives Matter.” Apart from the rather selective attention to such universal principles, those who asserted that “All Lives Matter” took themselves to be articulating an eternal idea and ideal.

But the question isn’t simply what’s true; the question is what needs to be said and done now, in this place and in this moment given this particular history. To assert that “All Lives Matter” as a response to “Black Lives Matter” is not wrong in principle but temporally. It fails to recognize that “Black Lives Matter” is something that has to be said here and now because of a specific (contingent) history that got us here. The assertion of the ideal, timeless truth that “All Lives Matter” is performatively false in such a situation. It lacks prudence and does not constitute faithful witness here, in this now. Our (shared) history makes all the difference for discerning what faithfulness looks like.3

This is just one example of the collective—social and political—implications for a properly temporal spirituality. There are also implications for personal discipleship. For example, nowhen Christianities that treat time as flat lack the pastoral subtlety and nuance to minister to people in different seasons of life. Whether in my own spiritual life or, say, the lifelong journey of a marriage, recognizing the reality of seasons can be incredibly liberating, not only because it changes our expectations but also because
it attunes us to receive God’s grace in different ways in different eras of a life. The spiritual dynamics of time and history are at once communal and individual, personal and political. We must attend to our history just as I face my own. Reckoning and hope scale to both soul and society.

What we need to counter spiritual dyschronometria and the fiction of nowhen Christianities is a renewed temporal awareness, a spiritual timekeeping that is attuned to the texture of history, the vicissitudes of life, and the tempo of the Spirit.

Such spiritual timekeeping isn’t just counting, like ticks on the clock or crossing out days on the calendar. To “number our days” (Ps. 90:12) is not just to count down, making notches on the wall as we hurtle toward the day we can’t count. Rather, this is counsel to know when we are, to find our bearings by an orientation to time and history. We are mortal, not just because we die but because we are the sorts of creatures whose very being is lived in time. Being mortal means being temporal.

Spiritual timekeeping is fundamentally a matter of awakening to our embeddedness in history and attending to our temporality—both individually and collectively. It is an exercise in drawing the map of the houses that built us. This is less a matter of sorting out the mysteries of what time is and more importantly discerning how time shapes us, as both history and future. “I confess to you, Lord, that I still do not know what time is,” Augustine admitted, “and I further confess to you, Lord, that as I say this I know myself to be conditioned by time.”4 It is this conditioning that nowhen Christianities refuse to recognize; it is the spiritual significance of such conditioning that interests us here.
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As a creature, every disciple is a temporal being, and our embeddedness in time and history is crucial for discerning what the shape of faithfulness looks like. We, both individually and collectively, are products of a contingent history. Our identities are bound up with roads taken and not. Like trees whose rings tell the story of fires and droughts from a distant past, our character and capacities reflect histories that long preceded us as well as the personal histories that amount to our own story. A faithful Christian life is a matter of keeping time with the Spirit. But what the Spirit asks of us always reflects history—our own, but also the history of the church and the societies in which we find ourselves. “What do we do now?” is one of the fundamental questions of discipleship.

We are not just talking about what to do spiritually with your time, as if time were one more commodity to spend wisely. The book of hours, for instance, is an ancient devotional device, and the liturgical calendar is an important collective discipline for the church. But what you hold in your hands is not a book about praying the hours or, God forbid, spiritualizing time management. This book is intended as a wake-up call to the significance of your temporality, our temporality—awakening to the way history lives in you, the way we inhabit history and history inhabits us, and the way futurity pulls us and shapes us. It’s not as simple as seeing the spiritual significance of your calendar but instead discerning the spiritual repercussions of a history that precedes you, lives in you, and shapes the future to which you are called.

Facing up to the spiritual significance of time, history, and futurity is almost the exact opposite of “management”; it is more like voluntary exposure to disruption, making oneself vulnerable to haunting. To face the spiritual significance of history is to contend with ghosts. We don’t need coaches who will help us manage our time; we need prophets who make us face our
histories (and futures). No one knew the spiritual significance of such historical reckoning better than James Baldwin. In a jarring essay he wrote for *Ebony* magazine in 1965, Baldwin named this:

White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us. . . . And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. . . . In great pain and terror because . . . one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating.5

What Baldwin says about our collective history is equally true of our personal histories. That map I drew in the counselor’s office was the beginning of painful labor, the work I had to do confronting Myself, the “Oneself” produced by that place and, more significantly, by my time in that place. My “I” is a “historical creation,” as Baldwin puts it, with strata of sediment, layers of formation, the charred lines of trauma in my history. I won’t know who I am until I know when I am. But the heartbreaking labor of that confrontation is also a beginning, a liberation, as Baldwin puts it, opening up a new future. The miracle of grace, Jesus said, is that we could be “born again” (John 3:3). Part of what makes this miraculous is that the new birth is not a blank slate. Nicodemus doesn’t understand this. He can only imagine being born again by rewinding the clock (“Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” John 3:4). Jesus is inviting him to consider the unthinkable: that this I, this historical creation, can be born again, can begin again. And not because God erases history;
that would mean erasing me, this “I” that is a historical creation. The miracle that puzzled Nicodemus, that should astound us, is that the God of grace can redeem even me—this historical creation—can begin again with this history that lives in me, that is me. It’s the body with scars that is resurrected; it’s the me with a history that is redeemed, forgiven, graced, liberated.

And we with our history need to do the same work of spiritually confronting the Ourself that has been created by the contingencies, choices, and injustices of history if a different future is going to be possible. Pick your “we”: it might be a congregation, a neighborhood, an institution; it might be the larger collectives of the church, a society, a nation. Baldwin’s insight holds true: all of these collectives are historical creations, and if the future is going to be different—if grace is going to reach these behemoths of history—the painful labor of confronting that history is the only way to give birth to a different future. This isn’t a matter of antiquarian fascination, like a hobby-historian’s interest in World War II programs on the History Channel; this is a matter of life and death in the present. It’s not a question of our past but a matter of who we are and will be. Again, Baldwin names this necessity:

All that can save you now is your confrontation with your own history . . . which is not your past, but your present. Nobody cares what happened in the past. One can’t afford to care what happened in the past. But your history has led you to this moment, and you can only begin to change yourself and save yourself by looking at what you are doing in the name of your history.6

Now, I’m not sure that even such confrontation with history means we can “save” ourselves, as Baldwin says. But if we are
going to be saved, we will certainly need to work out our salvation with fear and trembling as we come to terms with our histories.

The work of spiritual confrontation with our histories is a crucial part—though only a part—of the sort of disciplined temporal awareness I’m calling “spiritual timekeeping.” The prescription for our dyschronometria is a renewed time consciousness, a mindful regard for history, a dawning awareness of what it means to be a creature of and in the flow of time, with the accretions of history and the incessant waves that press us toward the shore of the future.

We might imagine spiritual timekeeping as an expansion of the spiritual discipline of memento mori, the disciplined habit of keeping death before us. Christians appropriated this practice of the Stoics with the inflection of the Psalms and the scent of ash. Thus St. Benedict counsels in his Rule: “Keep death daily before your eyes.”

The Baroque Flemish painter Philippe de Champaigne (whose painting of St. Augustine hangs in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art) painted a famous seventeenth-century invocation of this Benedictine counsel called, simply, Vanité, often known in English as “Still Life with a Skull.” The image is something of a triptych: the jarring, hollow glare of a skull is flanked by the bright life of a tulip on the left, already picked and thus dying, and an hourglass on the right, whose time is passing. Number thy days. Keep death before you.

In the spirit of memento mori, consider this book an invitation to the discipline of what we might call memento tempori. Remember you are temporal. Keep your history daily before you. Remember there is a future after the sand runs out, and
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that future is already bleeding into your present. *Dum spiro spero*: while I breathe, I hope.

Such temporal awareness must be cultivated. Like a child who climbs the tree in the field and finds the horizon widening, their world expanding, so a renewed time consciousness transforms our sense of place in God’s story—what German theologians, in a wonderful word you can sort of chew on, liked to call *Heilsgeschichte*, “holy history,” the unfurling of history as the drama of salvation. Each chapter of this book is an exercise in cultivating temporal awareness, a new angle on the ways the Spirit courses through time.

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We need to remember that at the heart of Christianity is not a teaching or a message or even a doctrine but an *event*. God’s self-revelation unfolds in time, and redemption is accomplished by what happens.

This truth is something that philosophers, more than theologians, have impressed upon me. It was perhaps the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who was the first catalyst in this regard. In his short work *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard works out why Christianity accords a unique significance to time. He contrasts a Christian understanding of time with what he calls the Socratic model, after Plato’s teacher. Socrates, we might say, was a proponent of a view from nowhere, an idealist conception of time in which, really, at the end of the day, time doesn’t matter. What happens doesn’t really change anything, for Socrates. Even when I become “enlightened,” when I come to know the truth, he says, I’m only recollecting what I already knew. Time doesn’t really make a difference. Indeed, the goal is to somehow overcome time to get to eternity.
In contrast, Kierkegaard says, in the Christian understanding of time, the instant of revelation—and the instant in which I am confronted by such revelation—is a decisive “moment” that changes everything. Things change in time, and that change is momentous—an emigration from darkness to light (Eph. 5:8), from death to life (Eph. 2:4–5), from nonbeing to being (1 Cor. 1:28). The moment is charged and pregnant, a turning point for the cosmos. History matters. What happens makes a difference. When I, at some point in time, am confronted with the mystery that the eternal God became human in the fullness of time, “then the moment in time must have such decisive significance that for no moment will I be able to forget it, neither in time nor in eternity, because the eternal, previously nonexistent, came into existence in that moment.”

Time and history are not just pseudostages on which to roll out timeless truths, like some mock unveiling of an open secret; rather, the truth is born at the very intersection of time and eternity, like a chemical reaction that requires both components. It might take only an instant, “the blink of an eye,” and yet it is the happening that makes all the difference. “A moment such as this is unique,” Kierkegaard continues. “To be sure, it is short and temporal, as the moment is; it is passing, as the moment is, past, as the moment is in the next moment, and yet it is decisive, and yet it is filled with the eternal. A moment such as this must have a special name. Let us call it: the fullness of time.” The paradigm of this intersection of time and eternity is the incarnation of God in Christ—the moment that is the fulcrum of human history. The intersection of time and eternity makes a difference for both. In history we see the contrails of the Spirit’s movement.

One of my favorite twentieth-century philosophers, O. K. Bouwsma, was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard. You can sense that influence in a succinct and beautiful passage in
which Bouwsma emphasizes “that Christianity is something that happened, and not a theory or an explanation or a set of doctrines.” Because Christianity is fundamentally a “happening,” we rightly understand it only in terms of story.

We all know that the story to which I have now referred is a long, long story and that the happening is a long, long happening. The happening takes place over many centuries, the story is composed of innumerable episodes—a story that is continued in sequels indefinitely.10

In fact, Bouwsma argues, we need to understand this story as a “love story” in which the Christian “becomes a character in the as-yet-unwritten continuation of the story” insofar as they come to see the story as a story about themselves, a story that transforms them not least by transforming their self-understanding.11 To be(come) a Christian is to live into this happening.

In 1927 a young, as-yet-unknown German philosopher named Martin Heidegger, a student of Kierkegaard, gave a lecture to the theologians at the university in Marburg.12 Musing on the nature and calling of theology, Heidegger emphasized, shockingly, that theology’s “topic” was not God but instead what he called Christlichkeit—“Christianness,” or the how of Christian existence. Theology, he emphasized, should reflect the very nature of faith, which is “not some more or less modified type of knowing” but rather a faith-full way of being in response to the event of revelation in “Christ, the crucified God.” Faith is a bow and, more specifically, a way of living in light of an event. Faith—the existential transformation called “rebirth”—is a mode of participating in the Christ-event. Because of this, Heidegger doesn’t talk about “Christianity” as an abstraction or something merely to be believed. Instead, he speaks of “the Christian occurrence”—the Christ-happening.
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Being a Christian, then, is not so much a matter of believing something about God as much as living in light of this event’s cascading effects on history. Christian faith is ongoing participation in the Christ-event which continues to rumble through human history. Christianity is less a what and more a how, a question of how to live given what has happened in Christ.

Thus Heidegger offers a unique definition of “faith.” His language is technical and a bit laborious, but I think it’s worth pausing to reflect on it and unpack the implications for faithfulness in time. “Faith,” he says, is “the believing-understanding mode of existing in the history revealed, i.e., occurring, with the Crucified.” The radicality of Heidegger’s argument is sort of buried in the prepositions here. Faith, he’s saying, is a how, a way of being, a “form of life” that is primarily a call to live “in” the historical event of the Crucified—the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the incarnate God. To live “in” that historical event is to live “with” the Crucified. Living into this event is fundamentally about communion with the crucified God. Whatever else we might say about it, the Christian life is a way of life that lives as if this history still matters—to live as if this history is now, and that this history is my history.13

Living “into” the history of revelation—living into the historical occurrence of the crucified God—is the call of the Christian life. But that requires a kind of historical consciousness that is eviscerated by too many forms of Christianity that amount to systematic forgetting.

What I’m calling the art of spiritual timekeeping—living out the faith with a disciplined temporal awareness—is informed by four fundamental convictions. First, spiritual timekeeping is the working out of our creaturely finitude as creatures embedded
in time (what Augustine described as our being “conditioned by time”).\textsuperscript{14} For every creature, to be is to become; to exist is to change; to have and to hold is to lose and to mourn; to awake is to hope. The baby’s chubby wrinkles presage the elder’s craggy folds. Autumn’s fire is latent in spring’s green. What difference does this make for living a life, as creatures, in communion with an eternal God? What this means for faith across a lifetime of becoming is at the heart of spiritual timekeeping, and we will explore different facets of this in the chapters below: how to forget, how to remember; how to mourn, how to enjoy what’s fleeting; how to wait, how to hope.

Second, spiritual timekeeping reflects a sense of time shaped by covenant—a promise made in history reverberates through subsequent time. God’s covenant with Abraham is the paradigm, finding its culmination in Jesus’s incarnational promise to never leave us or forsake us, even “to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20 NIV). That is a promise of presence through history—not above it or in spite of it. The promise itself recognizes our immersion in history, our subjection to the ages. As Annie Dillard once observed, “The absolute is available to everyone in every age. There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less.”\textsuperscript{15}

Third, spiritual timekeeping is nourished by Jesus’s promise that the Spirit will guide us into all truth across time (John 16:13). This stands in contrast to what I’ll call the “primitivism” of so much American Christianity. Primitivism is a curious view of history that sees God’s presence limited to only key points in history. Most importantly, primitivist Christianities assume that the Spirit was present in the first century and then somehow absent and forgotten for the long intervening centuries until someone (usually the leader of their sect) rediscovered “the truth” in the nineteenth century, say, and spawned a “renewal” movement that “recovered” the original, primitive truth. Such
primitivism writes off vast swaths of history as “Ichabod,”16 devoid of God’s presence, because that history doesn’t conform to their contemporary version of the original. In contrast, Jesus promises a dynamic work of the Spirit, who guides us into truth across time. This is the fundamental conviction of catholicity: the Spirit continues to guide and lead into the future, across history, still guiding, convicting, illuminating, and revealing, which is precisely why ongoing reform is necessary. The story is still unfolding. Listening to the Spirit is not an archaeological dig for some original deposit but rather an attunement to a God with us, still speaking, still surprising, still revealing.

Finally, spiritual timekeeping is animated by the future. Such a futural orientation we call “hope.” The church is a people of the future, a kingdom-come community that is always learning anew how to wait. The popular fixation on the end times is actually fundamentally ahistorical: it sees the present as merely a countdown to what is dictated by some supposed future that has already been determined, with charts to diagram the sequence. Such end-times eschatologies are just chronological countdowns to an end. But apocalyptic literature in the Bible is interested not in chronos (“clock time,” as Heidegger calls it) but in kairos, a fullness of time, a time charged in a way that can’t be simply measured. Christian eschatological hope is a kairological orientation to an inbreaking future that makes an impact on our present. The end-times countdown is a decline narrative: the clock is ticking to the rapture; everything in the meantime is just time endured before the escape pod descends. In contrast, spiritual timekeeping tries to discern where the Spirit’s restoration is already afoot in creation’s groaning.

These four theological convictions inform spiritual timekeeping. They are revelational realities that tune the clock of a spiritually sensitive people of God. And such attunement happens less through doctrinal treatises and more through the
spiritual disciplines of the church’s worship, reflecting the liturgical calendar, which, as we’ll see in chapter 3 below, reflects the way sacred time “bends.” Like the map we carry in our hearts, the church’s practices are disciplines of attunement that calibrate the spiritual timekeeping we carry in our bones. The habits of memento tempori are formed by the church’s practices of disciplined temporal awareness. What we need is not sensationalist end-times countdowns but a practical eschatology that enables us to live as a futural people animated by hope.

In nowhen forms of Christianity, the watchword is “preservation”; faithfulness is understood as the prolongation and preservation of what has been (often oblivious to how recent their version of “the fundamentals” is). In other words, in nowhen Christianity, faithfulness is a matter of guarding against change. In spiritual timekeeping, the watchword is “discernment”; faithfulness requires knowing when we are in order to discern what we are called to. In nowhen forms of Christianity, faithfulness is equated with sustaining a stasis; spiritual timekeeping, in contrast, is characterized by a dynamism of keeping time with the Spirit.

Keeping time with the Spirit is less a regimental march—left, right, left, right! ad infinitum—and more like a subtle dance, a responsive feel for what comes next. Lionel Salter offers a parallel in his description of a conductor’s role in an orchestra. “The conductor has to judge the proper tempo of the work, and indicate it clearly to the orchestra by movements of his baton.” But this is not just a mechanical process. What the music requires of the orchestra changes over the course of a symphony. If tempo were just a mechanical factor of timekeeping, “it would be sufficient to play the orchestra a couple of ticks from a metronome, or, as sometimes in dance bands, say ‘One—two,’ to set the right tempo for the whole piece.” But of course that’s not what happens with an orchestra, because
playing the symphony well requires different timing across the course of the work. “One of the beauties of music,” Salter remarks, “lies in its subtle variations of pace—the urging on, the yielding, the big broadening.” The conductor is helping the entire orchestra to become attuned to these subtleties.17

So, too, must the church be attuned to the living Spirit’s “conducting” in ways that are responsive to the moment: when to urge on, when to yield. Such discernment is true for the collective body of Christ in its communal witness and mission. But these dynamics of time are also important for one’s own spiritual life: to recognize, for example, seasons of a life with God, when the Spirit sometimes speaks _sotto voce_, almost inaudibly, and to discern what God asks of us in such a season—what God is doing _in_ us in such a season. Hence, the wisdom and discernment of spiritual timekeeping is integral to a life well-lived.

This book aims to help Christians know what time it is. I hope it might be an exercise akin to what my counselor asked of me, a discipline that Baldwin said is required of us: an exercise of reckoning with the histories we carry, an archaeology of our wounds and hopes, the way our home-clocks wound us in a particular way—and what God asks of us in our singular, pregnant _now_.

James K. A. Smith, _How To Inhabit Time_  
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