

Perman, Matt. *What's Best Next: How the Gospel Transforms the Way You Get Things Done*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014.

## **Introduction**

Countless self-help books have been written to satisfy Americans' seemingly insatiable therapeutic desires. But few genres of self-help have had as many cacophonous voices as the genre of personal management and productivity. Yet in spite of this diversity there has been strikingly little reflection or publication from a distinctly Christian perspective.

Matt Perman's *What's Best Next: How the Gospel Transforms the Way You Get Things Done* is an attempt to remedy this shortcoming. It is "a book about getting things done and making ideas happen, with less friction and frustration, from a biblical perspective (17)." The uniqueness of Perman's book lies in its thoughtful biblical perspective. In *What's Best Next* he presents a compelling model of Gospel-Driven Productivity (GDP), which places the gospel at the center of both personal leadership (the what and why of productivity) and personal management (the how of productivity).

## **Summary**

*What's Best Next* is divided into seven parts, but the seven parts reflect three essential foci. The first of the three foci is theoretical: Parts 1 and 2 are primarily concerned with the logical and theological foundations of productivity. The second focus is methodological: in Parts 3 through 7 the author articulates his productivity method step-by-step. The third focus is practical: Part 7 addresses how to apply the paradigm to enhance human flourishing and serve God's global purpose.

In Part 1, Chapter 1 Perman begins by introducing and reflecting upon the unique challenge of modern knowledge work: that the nature of the work itself is undefined. Knowledge work, therefore, paradoxically requires the worker to not only work, but to define his work before he does it. This is a skill that must be learned, and those who fail to do so risk falling victim to the first two productivity “villains” Perman identifies: the villains of ambiguity and overload.

In Chapter 2 Perman implicitly begins to address the issue of defining work by cogently arguing that effectiveness – “getting the right things done” – is the key to productivity, not efficiency. In Chapter 3 the book becomes explicitly theological, arguing that for work to be truly productive it must be intentionally God-centered in order to avoid two more villains: the villain of lack of fulfillment and the ultimate villain of the curse under which all mankind labors on account of sin. This chapter represents a unique contribution to productivity literature, as the author argues that being values- or principles-centered in pursuit of productivity is insufficient; only a God-centered model can lead to ultimate productivity. In Chapter 4 Perman further unpacks the theological foundations of the book, arguing that God had intended from creation for man to be productive, and that productivity is essential to Christian discipleship.

In Part 2, Perman introduces GDP. The essence of the method is “that, when considered in light of the gospel, to be productive is to be abundant in doing good for others, according to our gifts and abilities (71).” Part 2 unpacks the “the overall vision for how to go about getting things done (72).” Perman proceeds to lay out the biblical foundations of productivity and to highlight the key role God-centeredness plays in making one ultimately productive.

Parts 3 – 6 unpack the steps to implement GDP, which are memorably encapsulated by the acronym DARE: define, architect, reduce and execute. Defining (Part 3) is the essence of personal leadership: the determination of what really matters and why. This includes addressing four key issues: mission, vision, roles and goals. Defining mission (Chapter 11) requires one to uncover one’s core purpose (the overall mission of one’s life), principles (the guidelines by which one lives one’s life) and beliefs (the core convictions that underlie one’s identity and guide the trajectory of one’s life). A clear sense and articulation of mission leads to a clear vision for one’s life – that is, a clear set of life goals that one commits to accomplish as an outworking of mission (Chapter 12). Fulfilling this vision requires faithfully discharging certain everyday callings (Perman most often calls them “roles”), which “are also the means through which you accomplish your life goal (185).” These roles, in turn, have goals that create the productive change sought in a life goal.

Having addressed personal leadership from the perspective of GDP, Part 4 transitions to personal management by describing how to architect one’s life; that is, how to “structure your life by living mainly from a flexible routine, not a set of lists (194).” The key to setting oneself up to be productive (Chapter 14) is the creation of a prototypical schedule (a “time map”) that models an ideal allocation of time for a typical week. A well-constructed time map will allow adequate time for the primary roles and responsibilities one has while also allowing margin for the unexpected. This time map, however, ought to be one’s servant, not master; flexibility in the application of the routine is essential, particularly for those whose work is oriented toward the creation of knowledge or interaction with other people. Chapter 15 discusses the importance of

routines, which Perman argues paradoxically function to increase flexibility, and outlines six routines that will reinforce GDP.

The almost inevitable result of time mapping is the realization that there is simply too much to do! So in Part 5 Perman focuses on the difficult but necessary process of reducing one's schedule in order to maximize time available for what is most important. Reducing is the process of being "ruthless in pruning and containing...tasks so that [one is] able to keep them within the time frames...allocated (221)." Reducing well requires three things. First, one must recognize that doing less enables one to do more (Chapter 16). Systems become inefficient when operating at greater than 90% capacity, and human beings are no exception. Second, one must develop the ability to free up time through effectively and thoughtfully delegating, automating, eliminating and deferring (Chapter 17). Finally, one must learn to turn obstacles to productivity into advantages; to turn so-called "time killers" into tools for greater productivity (Chapter 18).

Part 6 focuses on the final step of Perman's method: execution. This is the step in which one actually does what is important. Again an acronym aids memory: POD (plan, organize, do). In order to execute efficiently, one must consistently plan one's week (Chapter 19) and manage email and workflow well (Chapter 20) while also managing the progress of projects and actions (Chapter 21) so that things actually get done. Part 6 concludes with an eminently practical chapter on principles for making things happen on a daily basis (Chapter 22).

Lest concerns over productivity, leadership and management be misunderstood to be exclusively personal, Part 7 focuses on broader concerns for productivity in organizations, society and God's kingdom. Chapter 23 argues that "the biblical

command to seek the good of others means that we need to broaden the concept of productivity altogether (301).” While the emphasis of the book is primarily on personal and professional productivity, Perman argues that the same principles must be applied to organizations and to society as a whole. Becoming effective oneself and developing effective organizations is “simply a matter of loving others (305).” Finally, Perman concludes by applying productivity practices in the service of God’s global mission (Chapter 24), arguing that both the doctrine and praxis of vocation is essential to the cause of missions.

### **Critical Evaluation**

If one were permitted to read only one book on productivity, a strong case could be made that *What’s Best Next* ought to be that book. Matt Perman demonstrates a keen interest in and self-evident mastery of the subject on which he writes. His book, therefore, in many ways stands at a pinnacle in productivity literature: aware of established orthodoxy but looking forward to an improved paradigm. Perman effectively distills wisdom from over fifty years of management and productivity literature, bring to bear much of the best from men such as Peter Drucker, Steven Covey and David Allen. (That he is able to apply this wisdom at the abstract level of personal leadership as well as at the concrete level of personal management in a single work is an impressive accomplishment.) Moreover, there is great value in the extensive effort Perman made in interviewing productive and influential leaders while developing GDP. This value is implicit everywhere, but it is made explicit in helpful vignettes scattered throughout the book to convey key lessons from those interviews and to clearly illustrate the principles Perman articulates. Finally, the book is greatly enhanced by Perman’s own experiences

and reflections as a productivity-seeker; the lessons he learned in the school of hard knocks add an element of practical wisdom and make the book eminently relatable.

Perman is also to be commended for approaching the subject from an explicitly Christian worldview and taking a thoroughgoingly Biblicist approach to the subject. He does not presume that secular productivity literature is right or wrong, good or bad. Rather, he seeks to examine common grace wisdom through a Biblical lens, affirming the good and rejecting the bad, in order to build GDP on a good foundation.

Perhaps on account of the foregoing, the book is neither kitschy nor cliché, as so many books on productivity tend to be. The book reads as a thoughtful research paper, not a tawdry motivational speech. Nowhere does the reader have cause to question the author's motives or ask if the author is selling something. Where Perman advocates for a particular perspective he is clear about his bias (e.g., his argument for the theology that is foundational to GDP), and is most everywhere judicious and non-prejudicial in his analysis. In this way, he reflects not only the knowledge of the Drucker/Covey/Allen tradition, but also its integrity.

The book is not, however, without weaknesses. While the book's progression is essentially linear, it progresses in a spiral pattern, oscillating forward, backward and then forward again as the author argues and develops his method. This leads to frequent repetition of concepts and occasional verbal repetition (particularly evident in Part 5). Such repetition is a helpful service to an audience listening to a speech, but is unnecessary and even distracting in written form. Repetition is also costly to the book in other ways. One is that the book is 330 pages, which is very long for a work in its genre. It is not hard to imagine the book finding a broader audience if it were more concise. But

even more significantly, there are several places where arguments are significantly underdeveloped and would benefit from further exposition. As an example, in a key section near the end of the book the author wrote that “it would take too long to go into the exegesis” of a key passage underlying his argument that productivity in everyday life is essentially connected to the advance of the gospel (318). (After enduring what at times felt like bludgeoning by repetition, the reviewer found this particular shortcoming in a key argument maddening.) A more economical approach that reduced repetition could easily have provided space for the development of such important arguments.

There are also significant ambiguities in the book that result from imprecision in the use of terminology. For example, in Chapter 13 the concept of a “role” is introduced as an “area of responsibility” and expanded to include the doctrine of vocation. Roles, thereafter, are described as “callings,” “vocations,” “estates” and “stewardship from God.” There are, however, areas and responsibilities within roles: “work roles typically break down into about five to seven areas, each with corresponding responsibilities (183).” Perman does an admirable job of bringing multiple perspectives to bear on the question of the key callings of one’s life, but more careful attention to terminology would enhance the discussion. Another key example of such imprecision is the frequent oscillation frequent between “God-centered” and “gospel-centered” as well as “gospel-centered” and “gospel-driven.”

Perhaps most significantly, there is a conceptual inconsistency in the book around the doctrine of vocation. It is a great benefit to the work that it is grounded in the doctrine of vocation and that the author recognizes the essential connection between Genesis 1:26-28 and how believers live out their lives for God’s glory and the

advancement of God's global mission. However, the doctrine of vocation is often obscured by the author's consistent exhortations to pursue big, hairy, audacious goals for God's glory. Perman is seemingly sensitive to exclude extremes (see, for example, his careful exposition of the statement "to be productive is to do all the good you can (75)"). But his consistent emphasis on the ability of productivity to enable tasks beyond everyday vocation (with the implication that they are of higher value) and his willing acceptance of a distinction between "big things" and "small things" (169) militate against the doctrine of vocation. To wit, it is difficult to reconcile statements such as "Thinking big and aiming high for the glory of God puts us in the realm of our life calling or vision" (170) with statements such as "Perhaps the chief way God transforms our communities and the world is through our everyday vocations" and "Paul sees an essential and profound connection between the arena of our everyday lives and the advancement of the gospel (318)."

While significant, these criticisms ought not obscure what is an extraordinary work nor should they discourage a reader from consuming the book. The best advice the reviewer can provide is to acquire the book and read it now, and then buy the second edition, which will undoubtedly be even richer for the author's continued reflection on how the gospel animates productivity.

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