

Wesley's Legacy of Work

Living in the Splendor and the Shadow



Rebekah Miles

Leisure and I have taken leave of one another; I propose to be busy as long as I live.”¹ A young John Wesley made this startling pledge to his older brother Samuel and then spent the rest of his life making it true. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that Wesley was “busy as long as he lived.” He gave himself and his time freely and abundantly in service of God and neighbor and encouraged his Methodists to do the same. He exhorted them to “redeem the time, crowding as much work into every day as it can contain.”² And he actively discouraged them from idleness. “A Christian abhors sloth as much as drunkenness and flees from idleness as he does from adultery.”³

As United Methodist clergy we live in the splendor and the shadow of Wesley’s work ethic. We embrace hard work and enjoy the abundance of its yield in our ministries. And yet many of us are also prey to the dangers of working too hard. When you and I (along with a host of other Methodist clergy across the history of our denomination) were voted into full membership, our bishops read the historic questions and closed with stark instructions about our work and our use of time. “Be

diligent. Never be triflingly employed. Never trifle away time. Neither spend any more time in one place than is strictly necessary.”⁴ Some of us may chuckle and smile at the quaintness of the words and the typical Wesleyan excess that stands behind them, but we chuckle and smile without missing a beat or a moment of work—not trifling “away time” or “spending any more

“Deliver me, O God,
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teach me to go through
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John Wesley

time in one place than is strictly necessary.” For good and for ill, Wesley’s teachings live on in many of his descendants.

This tradition of hard work is not without problems. One study shows that overwork can be tough on pastors and their ministries. Clergy working the most hours (an average of 62 hours a week) and not taking a weekly day off, reported the most resentment and stress. Pastors averaging 45-50 work-hours a week and taking vacations and a weekly day off reported the highest levels of satisfaction with their

work.⁵ When we look at the pattern of high burn-out and low retention among clergy, these studies about overwork and job dissatisfaction may help explain part of the problem and point toward one partial solution.

Clergy aren’t the only ones who know how to work hard and who sometimes suffer the consequences of overwork. According to several studies published over the past decade, Americans have increased their hours on the job tremendously since the 1970s—as much as a month a year.⁶ And like the clergy study mentioned above, several broader studies of employees have found that high levels of dissatisfaction and resentment are often much higher among those who put in the most hours and forgo vacations.⁷ Excessive work hours and the accompanying feeling of being

overworked have been linked with higher stress, more errors on the job, and greater frustration and anger with employers and co-workers. Health can also be affected. Excessive hours on the job are associated with heart problems, high blood pressure, and a tendency to be overweight and to use more addictive substances. And, not surprisingly, more time on the job often means that some workers have less time for family, for church, and for community.

Wesley exhorted Christians to “redeem the time, crowding as much work into

every day as it can contain." Is this the best advice for clergy today or for the members of United Methodist congregations? Does Wesley have anything to say to an over-worked culture?

Fortunately, Wesley's obsession with work is not the whole story. Wesley also warned against the dangers of too much work and offered advice that is fitting for our time. What can Wesley say to clergy and laity today?

Remembering the Sabbath

Wesley insisted that Christians should observe the Sabbath. Because the Sabbath belongs to God, Christians who work on the Sabbath "rob God." Wesley scolds "Sabbath-breakers" often lumping them in a list of sinners that includes "common swearers" and "drunkards." To those tempted to break the Sabbath, Wesley advises, "Let not a little thing keep you from the house of God, either in the forenoon or afternoon. And spend as much as you can of the rest of the day, either in repeating what you have heard, or in reading the Scripture, or in private prayer, or talking of the things of God. Let his love be ever before your eyes."⁸

Wesley's judgments may seem harsh to many today, but it is important to remember that for Wesley, Christians are to honor the Sabbath not simply because it is a divine command but also because it is day of special blessing. Wesley wrote, "The Lord not only hallowed the Sabbath-day, but he hath also blessed it. . . . You throw away your own blessing, if you neglect to "keep this day holy." It is a day of special grace. The King of heaven now sits upon his mercy-seat, in a more gracious manner than on other days, to bestow blessings on those who observe it. If you love your own soul, can you then forbear laying hold on so happy an opportunity? Awake, arise, let God give thee his blessing! Receive a token of his love!"⁹ When Christians observe the Sabbath, they receive special blessing of God." Can we, as United Methodist clergy, find a way to renew the Sabbath and to receive that special blessing from God? How do we encourage parishioners to honor the Sabbath?

Keeping Work in Its Place

Wesley, for all his commitment to hard work, was also ambivalent about work. He notes that people can work too much, risking their physical and spiritual health.¹⁰ He recognizes the need for time

away from work. "We cannot be always intent upon business: Both our bodies and minds require some relaxation. We need intervals of diversion from business."¹¹ Wesley honors work for pragmatic reasons but does not make it the center of life. Work helps us to avoid debt and to provide for our families, our businesses and ourselves. But temporal work can also be dangerous.

Wesley was particularly worried that work would pull Christians away from their primary task—to grow in the love of God and neighbor. Work, like any other temporal activity, can leave us dissipated or distracted from our true center. A "dissipated man," Wesley wrote, "is a man that is separated from God; that is disunited from his centre; whether this be occasioned by hurry of business, by seeking honour or preferment, or by fondness for diversions . . . or for any trifle under the sun."¹² To counter the dangers of dissipation, Wesley prayed that he might pursue his business with a "disengaged heart."

Deliver me, O God, from too intense an application to even necessary business. I know how this dissipates my thoughts from the one end of all my business, and impairs that lively perception I would ever retain of thee standing at my right hand. I know the narrowness of my heart, and that an eager attention to earthly things leaves it no room for the things of heaven. O teach me to go through all my employments with so truly disengaged a heart, that I may still see thee in all things, and see thee therein as continually looking upon me, and searching my reins; and that I may never impair that liberty of spirit which is necessary for the love of thee.¹³

This Wesleyan model of work is also evident in Charles Wesley's hymns. In "Servant of All to Toil for Man," a hymn about human labor, Charles Wesley wrote,

Careless through outward cares I go,
From all distraction free;
My hands are but engaged below,
My heart is still with thee.¹⁴

For both Charles and John Wesley, the key human task is not to labour, but to focus on God and to love God. Work can be good if done with a "disengaged heart." Work can be dangerous if it draws our hearts away from that higher purpose. How can we avoid the distraction and dissipation that often comes with ministry?

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How can we live so that the work of ministry can draw our hearts toward the love of God and neighbor.

One Thing Needful

The Wesley brothers' worry about the dangers of dissipation is not surprising given John Wesley's insistence that temporal work, including much of the business side of ministry, is never the "one thing needful." John Wesley often used the gospel story of Mary and Martha to underline the importance of not being diverted by work or any worldly activity, focusing instead on "the one thing needful." He wrote, "And even as much serving dissipated the thoughts of Martha, and distracted her from attending to her Lord's words, so a thousand things which daily occur are apt to dissipate our thoughts, and distract us from attending to His voice who is continually speaking to our hearts. . . We are encompassed on all sides with persons and things that tend to draw us from our centre. Indeed, every creature, if we are not continually on our guard, will draw us from our Creator . . . [and] distract our minds from attending to Him who is both the Author and End of our being."¹⁵

When many today talk about vocation or calling, they refer to ordinary employment. When Wesley writes about "vocation" he is referring not to our calling for temporal work but to our calling to live a Christian life.¹⁶ Wesley does not offer the great praises to ordinary work that are found in Luther, Calvin, and some Puritan leaders of his time. For Wesley the primary Christian vocation and calling is not work, but holiness. Wesley, unlike Luther, is not making all ordinary work holy, but is, instead, calling all to holy work—to the desire for holiness in their lives and the lives of others. Our work, even the ordinary business of ministry, can either help or hinder that high call to holiness.

We who have been ordained as United Methodist clergy live in the splendor and the shadow of Wesley's view of work. For Wesleyans today the only way to avoid the shadow and move into the splendor of a Wesleyan model of work is to remember, in the midst of our hard work, that our primary task is not the next appointment in our date book or the next item on our to-do list, however important they might be. Our primary task is to keep our minds and our hearts on the love of God in

Christ Jesus. If we can do that, then in all of the small tasks of our lives—whether writing sermons, visiting hospitals, attending meetings, or washing dishes, we will choose the "one thing needful." □

- 1 John Wesley, "Letter to His Brother Samuel" (no date), in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols., CD-ROM edition (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 1994), 12:20; hereafter cited as *Works* (Jackson). Some material in this article was presented at "Celebrating and Revisiting the Wesleyan Movements," Candler School of Theology, January 2003.
- 2 Wesley, Sermon 4, "Scriptural Christianity," §9, V:51 in *Works* (Jackson).
- 3 Wesley, Sermon 29, "Sermon on the Mount, Discourse 9," 5:385 in *Works* (Jackson).
- 4 *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (2000), 214.
- 5 David Briggs, "Clergy are Workaholics," at www.webedelic.com/church/clergyworkf.htm.
- 6 Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) and *The Families and Work, "The 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce, Executive Summary,"* 1998 (found at <http://www.familiesandwork.org>).
- 7 The Families and Work Institute, "Feeling Overworked: When Work Becomes Too Much, Executive Summary" New York: The Families and Work Institute, 2001 (found at <http://www.familiesandwork.org>). This subject was addressed in my article, "That's All a Mule Can Do: The Ethics of Balancing Work at Home and on the Job." Maguire Center Occasional Papers (Maguire Center for Ethics, Dallas, 2003)
- 8 Wesley, "A Word to the Sabbath Breaker," IX:164 in *Works* (Jackson).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 165.
- 10 Wesley, Sermon 50, "The Use of Money," §1.1, VI:127 in *Works* (Jackson) and Wesley, Sermon 79, "On Dissipation," VI:444-52 in *Works* (Jackson).
- 11 Wesley, Sermon 89, "The More Excellent Way," §5, VII:33 in *Works* (Jackson).
- 12 Wesley, Sermon 79, "On Dissipation," VI:447-48 in *Works* (Jackson).
- 13 Wesley, "Forms of Prayer for Every Day of the Week," XI:208 in *Works* (Jackson).
- 14 Charles Wesley, "Servant of All to Toil for Man," in *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Writings and Hymns*, Frank Whaling, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 212.
- 15 Wesley, Sermon 79, "On Dissipation" VI:446, in *Works* (Jackson).
- 16 Wesley, Sermon 23, "Sermon on the Mount, Discourse 3," V: 284 in *Works* (Jackson); Wesley, Sermon 74, "Of the Church," VI: 394-98 in *Works* (Jackson); and Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," VIII:347 in *Works* (Jackson).



Rebekah Miles is associate professor of Ethics at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas.