

## **CHARLES WESLEY ON WORK AND DIVINE UBIQUITY: REFLECTIONS ON “FORTH IN THY NAME O LORD I GO, MY DAILY LABOUR TO PURSUE...”<sup>1</sup>**

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*Work occupies a major part of human life. Its role is affirmed and its practitioners are encouraged in Scripture. It has become a major and serious topic of theological reflection, however, only in the late twentieth century. Yet Charles Wesley penned probably the most comprehensive hymnic reflection on work in his “Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go” in 1749. This paper introduces this hymn with attention to both the theology and social activism of the ministry of John and Charles Wesley. It notes the positive view of work, against a current view that work is just an opportunity for “real” (that is, evangelistic) ministry. The oft excluded third verse is considered in the light of the deceptions that work can bring and as a call to stand against the current scourge of workaholism. The paper concludes with a call to holistic thinking as regards God’s engagement in the world and, in the light of that, the place that work plays in life, service, worship and joy.*

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It is a joy to engage my Wesleyan roots through this article. My father was born and raised a Methodist, and the Cappers of Cheshire were movers and shakers, and layers of many foundation stones, in many Primitive Methodist chapels. That my father, in marrying an Anglican, reverted to Anglicanism is either a sign of his returning to his tradition’s roots or of tragic backsliding, depending on one’s perspective. I remain a backslidden Wesleyan, and like John and Charles Wesley, hope to end my days as an ordained member of that strange Anglican sect. Now, to the promised topic: Charles Wesley on Work and Divine Ubiquity: A Reflection on “Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go, My Daily Labour to Pursue...”

**Work occupies a major part of human life.**

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered at the Symposium held at Kingsley College on 24 October 2007 to mark the Tercentenary of the Birth of Charles Wesley.

Work – like death and taxes, in the popular imagination, is inescapable, necessary, and for the most part, a burden. How much more so was this the case in the time of the Wesleys when there were longer working days, in the age before electric light; heavier work, in days of only moderately powerful machinery, and education as a less necessary preparation for vocation than it is today for most.

Christians have had, through the centuries, a love-hate relationship with work. It has occupied much of life, but little time in the pulpit. In recent centuries, so it seems, much has been done in discipling to prepare Christians for the sure and certain hope of the life to come, whilst little effort has been expended in equipping the flock for the grind of the weekly forty-plus hours of labour. The recent move to consider work, and indeed the whole of the everyday, as a topic of theology is welcome, and we have Australian theologian Robert Banks largely to thank for that. Both in his role as Homer Goddard Professor of the Laity at Fuller Seminary, and most recently at the Macquarie Christian Studies Institute in Sydney, Rob has elevated the profile of the everyday in theological exploration. His reminder that God is not only omnipresent, but interested in the ubiquitous aspects of the world created, in the quotidian tasks of humankind, and the particular expressions of faith that find expression there, is a welcome move. Banks has begun a move that has had widespread influence. To this we will return.

### **Work's role is affirmed and its practitioners are encouraged in Scripture.**

A biblical theology of work would note that God placed the first humans in the primeval Eden with the command to the man to “work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15, NIV). This was indeed the same God and the same humanity introduced in the earlier chapter as made in God's own image (Gen 1:26-27). And, indeed, it is God at work that we first meet in Scripture, both canonically and chronologically. It is in work within and care for the environment that we first encounter humanity at work. We are, as Gordon Preece describes us, “junior partners in God's work of creation, preservation and redemption.”<sup>2</sup> This work, however, is reconfigured as toil after the breach in relationship that the man and the woman precipitate. Their harmony with God, their harmony with each

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon Preece, “Work,” in Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens, eds. *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 1124.

other, their harmony with the created world and even their own inner harmony is breached.

To Adam [God] said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through *painful toil* you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the *sweat of your brow* you will eat our food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Gen. 3:17-19)<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that this follows on the curse that is given to the woman and all women who follow her, that

I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you. (Gen 3:16).

What might also be noted is that God's response to the couple he has cursed is to care for them by working for them.

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. (Gen 3:21)

Suffice it to note here that this is the foundation on which a biblical theology of work can be founded, and it is indeed the basis on which the few explicit biblical reflections are built. Further, this foundation has been built upon, but only sporadically, in the life of the Christian community. It is in evidence, for instance, in Benedict's *Rule*, and in some of the work of Luther, but it has rarely been foregrounded in theological exploration and enquiry.

**Work has become a major and serious topic of theological reflection, however, only in the late twentieth century.**

This poverty of attention has been somewhat satisfied in recent years with the rise of theological attention, initiated by Robert Banks. This is part of an effort to reverse the dualism that has pervaded modern Christian life and theology, and perhaps pre-eminently the practice of Sunday meetings which are conducted in isolation from everyday life, and which thus suggest that God is

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<sup>3</sup> emphasis added

remote at times in which the people of God are not gathered. Banks, and with him R. Paul Stevens of Regent College, Vancouver, have opened up discourse on matters of sleep, unionism, business, business ethics, and work in general. Their work has been well represented here in Melbourne through the work of Gordon Preece, of Ridley College and then Macquarie Christian Studies Institute and of Simon Holt, of Whitley College. Both of these scholars were supervised in their doctoral studies by Robert Banks. This group of scholars has attracted attention more broadly, and there is now a growing movement, based in Fuller, Regent, Macquarie Christian Studies Institute, and arguably Ridley Hall, Cambridge.

Banks and Stevens tell us that

Everyday life is a complex affair...[T]he major Christian traditions have always insisted...that our religious convictions and values should be reflected in all we do [and] all...activities need to be related to our understanding of God...<sup>4</sup>

The God of life is interested in *all* of life. The incarnation was not just for show, but shows just how much God believes in the value of the fallen but redeemable creation. The redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ includes the redemption of work and its renewed value. In the Lord, Paul tells us (1 Cor 15:58), our labour is not in vain.

God takes interest in the labour of humans. Martin Luther, reacting against the disregard in which trades were held in his time, claimed that the Lord himself milks the cows through the one whose vocation it is. Luther sought to restore vocation as a concept relevant to the whole people of God, not just those with specifically “religious” vocations. “The cobbler, in making shoes,” says Luther, “serves and obeys God quite as much as the preacher of the word.”<sup>5</sup>

Work is not just a relic of the primeval creation, and it is not constantly corrupted by human disobedience. Rather,

### **Work is part of the redeemed creation.**

And so it is that Luther can say: *Laborare est orare*.<sup>6</sup> All that is done can and should, for Christians, be done in worship of our

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<sup>4</sup> Banks and Stevens, vii.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Preece, 1126.

<sup>6</sup> “To work is to pray.”

creator and redeemer, God. The sense, in current society, of personal ownership of and personal definition by, one's career has made this a harder concept for Christians to exemplify and promote. Yet the call to joy in work and to all human life integrated into the life of God in us is real and lasting. Spirituality is at place in all parts of life and all locations. God is not only present everywhere, but active everywhere. So it is that we trace a trajectory of reintegration of work and worship, and into that we place the great hymn which lies at the centre of our attention in this paper.

Charles Wesley penned probably the most comprehensive hymnic reflection on work in his *Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go* in 1749. This was not his only ode to work, nor his only hymn inspired by people in their vocations. Other hymns inspired by work include *See how great a flame aspires* (1746).

See how great a flame aspires,  
Kindled by a spark of grace!  
Jesus' love the nations fires,  
Sets the kingdoms on a blaze:  
To bring fire on earth He came;  
Kindled in some hearts it is:  
O that all might catch the flame,  
All partake the glorious bliss!

When He first the work begun,  
Small and feeble was His day:  
Now the word doth swiftly run;  
Now it wins its widening way:  
More and more it spreads and grows,  
Ever mighty to prevail;  
Sin's strongholds it now o'erthrows,  
Shakes the trembling gates of hell.

Sons of God, your Saviour praise!  
He the door hath opened wide!  
He hath given the word of grace,  
Jesus' word is glorified;  
Jesus, mighty to redeem,  
He alone the work hath wrought;  
Worthy is the work of Him,  
Him Who spake a world from naught.

Saw ye not the cloud arise,  
Little as a human hand?  
Now it spreads along the skies,

Hangs o'er all the thirsty land:  
Lo! the promise of a shower  
Drops already from above;  
But the Lord will shortly pour  
All the spirit of His love.

Jackson states that the hymn was written:

on the joyful occasion of his ministerial success, and that of his fellow labourers, in Newcastle and vicinity. Perhaps the imagery was suggested by the large fires connected with the collieries, which illuminate the whole of that part of the country in the darkest nights.<sup>7</sup>

This and another are cited by C. H. Spurgeon in his *Lecture on the Two Wesleys*.<sup>8</sup> That other hymn, inspired by work in the stone quarries, includes these words:

Come, O Thou all-victorious Lord!  
Thy power to us make known;  
Strike with the hammer of Thy Word,  
And break these hearts of stone.

Wesley wrote this hymn during a visit to Portland in June, 1746, where the quarrymen's work suggested the theme and the line "Strike with the hammer of Thy Word, and break these hearts of stone." It appeared in *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1749. More obliquely, from his *Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures*, 1762.:

O Thou Who camest from above,  
The pure celestial fire to impart,  
Kindle a flame of sacred love  
Upon the mean altar of my heart.

There let it for Thy glory burn  
With inextinguishable blaze,  
[or, Unquenched, undimmed, in darkest days,]  
And trembling to its source return,  
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

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<sup>7</sup>*Memoirs of the Rev. Charles Wesley*, 1848.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The two Wesleys: A lecture delivered in the Metropolitan Tabernacle lecture hall, on December 6th, 1861."

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire  
To work and speak and think for Thee:  
Still let me guard the holy fire,  
And still stir up Thy gift in me.

Ready for all Thy perfect will,  
My acts of faith and love repeat,  
Till death Thy endless mercies seal,  
And make my sacrifice complete.

This paper introduces the hymn which attracts our interest, with attention to both the theology and social activism of the ministry of John and Charles Wesley. I will refer to the hymn by the stanza number and line number, and we will for the most part travel through the hymn in the order in which it was written.

### Stanza 1

#### 1.1. Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I go

My own experience of this hymn is shaped by its liturgical placement. It has, in my experience, been used as a final or recessional hymn. It lends itself to the leaving of the gathered community and heading out:

#### 1.2. My daily labour to pursue;

And so there is the key – the leaving of the gathered community is not to a new encounter with God, but an encounter shaped in the context of the quotidian task.

#### 1.3. Thee, only Thee, resolved to know

What makes this engagement with the workaday world different for Christians is that the knowing of Jesus in intimacy and in eucharist is to shape all that we do. Knowledge above all, Knowledge of God above all other knowledge. This is the resolve of the Christian. Him only to know and serve, in all things.

#### 1.4. In all I think or speak or do.

The whole of the life of action is part of the interest that God has in humankind and its work. Here there is a breaking of any

perceived duality. The preacher who had the world for his parish had not just the open spaces, but all places. He had not just the remote, but the central. Not just the deserted, but the populated, and even the crowded. And all of our actions, thoughts and words, are to be part of that whole. So this first stanza has set the scene and has established a wide ranging locus for the graced actions of the people of God.

## Stanza 2

So we turn from the general connect of our labours to the particulars of work.

1.5. The task Thy wisdom hath assigned,

Within the context of the daily tasks, Wesley notes God's sovereignty, in that it is God's wisdom, not blind chance, that has assigned the tasks that occupy us.

1.6. O let me cheerfully fulfill;

For Charles Wesley, the Christian was not simply to bear the load, but joyfully to shoulder the load. The response of the Christian is not blind or unquestioning obedience. The Christian does not, at his or her best, respond in obedience merely due to the fear of punishment. Rather, the Christian chooses to serve God with gratitude, gladness and in praise. This is echoed in Karl Barth's description of human obedience.<sup>9</sup>

1.7. In all my works Thy presence find,

Here, as in so much of Wesley, is the sense that God is everywhere and is everywhere attentive, available and accessible.

1.8. And prove Thy good and perfect will.

In the finding is the finding more. In labour is enrichment, not just in fiscal terms, but in growth, in discovery, and in assurance. The God who puts us here, does not leave us here. He shows faithfulness in allowing us to travel and explore.

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.1.219 and 223, 674



## Stanza 4

We skip the third stanza for the moment. Here in the fourth, we see something of the reflexivity of God's presence and encounter.

4.1. Thee may I set at my right hand,

Not only is God there and at work, God is to be set in his place with us. He does not demand a place so much as, for Wesley, he is willing to be invited, and to take up the offer of a place. The one in authority is to be the King of Glory, in his way, and in his time.

4.2. Whose eyes mine inmost substance see,

God's searching presence is not interested only in our appearance. God searches the heart and sees us in our most vulnerable and in our most intimate places, in all of our life.

4.3. And labour on at Thy command,

But we work on not because we are seen, because we are being watched, as it were. We labour because we are bid. For Christians, all jobs are, or at least can be, callings or vocations from God. We are slaves, who are called friends, but we do not forget who is the boss.

4.4. And offer all my works to Thee.

For the Christian, work has a direction. It is not for utilitarian outcomes that we work, but that we might in all our doings be and offer a living sacrifice to God. This is our intention - that we should be closer to an integrated sense of God's presence than we could be if we were to have self-serving motives.

## 5. Stanza 5

The fifth stanza sets our work in its temporal and its eternal frame. First and foundationally, work for Christians is set in the context of discipleship.

5.1. Give me to bear Thy easy yoke,

It is in the taking up of the cross and the following that we are both seen and show ourselves to be disciples. Taking up the cross and following Jesus is not the end, necessarily, but it is the necessary starting point.

5.2. And every moment watch and pray,

We look to that which is coming. The hope of glory and the expectation of God's redemptive return are in mind, as we think that Jesus and Paul both called the followers of the Messiah to look for his coming again.

5.3. And still to things eternal look,

And so we look to the full, the real, the seen, and these are both a means of staying focused, and of looking beyond the immediate circumstances.

5.4. And hasten to Thy glorious day.

John and Charles Wesley both seem to have had a strong sense of remaining focused by the yet to be fulfilled promise of entry into the glorious presence of the Lord. This might, in this day of awareness of the dangers of "escape-pod" eschatology, be seen to reject the presence of the future as seems to be the case in the work of N.T. Wright, the eminent New Testament scholar and Bishop of Durham.

## 6. Stanza 6

So with focus on the task and with the cosmic frame in place, we turn to the pleromatic aspect of the work of God in us. The task is cosmic in its scope. It is to be lived and to be lived into. And in all it is filled with joy and delight.

6.1. For Thee delightfully employ

Here we see that the task is configured as one of joy and delight. Not just responsibly employed; not just obediently undertaken; the task is one that involves the joyful obedience of Christians. The shovel makes delightful music for God when used well and for the right reasons. So likewise the flute is a means of expressing joy at God's grace and generosity.

6.2. Whate'er Thy bounteous grace hath giv'n;

We say with David and with the Prayer Book that the Wesleys used, "all things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee" (1 Chronicles 29:14). Our role in work is to work with God, and with the raw materials that God has provided. Of ourselves we make nothing, at least, we make nothing from *nothing*. Rather, we work with God as we work for God.

6.3. And run my course with even joy,

Steady, that is the desire. That we might run evenly, and thus moderately fast for the longest possible time. No hare, no tortoise, just solid steps forward. And with them, an openness to what you may need or want.

6.4. And closely walk with Thee to Heav'n.

Here again, Charles Wesley's sense that the end is escape, that freedom comes from release from this world, is in evidence. The view that work is part of godly immersion seems to me to be both better as regards the nature of the incarnation and salvation and also on the grounds of a more circumspect reading of the scriptures. In all this, the focus has been on work, not on any particular job or career. The role of work, for Wesley, is a combination of having utilitarian value, of having value to God, and of being a means of showing our valuing of God and God's presence.

**A positive view of work runs against a current view that work is just an opportunity for "real" (that is, evangelistic) ministry.**

There is a view abroad that we are only Christians in our workplaces if we are explicitly Christian. Whilst this may in some cases be needed (no one should be eager to avoid speaking of God, when asked, surely?), work as mere opportunity for evangelism seems to be to be an undervaluing of the intrinsic value of work.

Consider the hymn adapted from George Herbert (from *The Temple*, 1633), with modification to verses 2 to 4 by John Wesley in 1738.

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things Thee to see,  
And what I do in anything  
To do it as for Thee.

A man that looks on glass,  
On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
And then the heaven espy.

To scorn the senses' sway,  
While still to Thee I tend:  
In all I do be Thou the Way,  
In all be Thou the End.

All may of Thee partake;  
Nothing so small can be  
But draws, when acted for Thy sake,  
Greatness and worth from Thee.

If done to obey Thy laws,  
E'en servile labors shine;  
Hallowed is toil, if this the cause,  
The meanest work divine.

Rewritten from Herbert:

A servant with this cause  
Makes drudgery divine:  
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,  
Makes that and th' action fine.

This is the famous stone  
That turneth all to gold;  
For that which God doth touch and own  
Cannot for less be sold.

The oft excluded third verse of "Forth in thy name" is considered in the light of the deceptions that work can bring and as a call to stand against the current scourge of workaholism. I note that this is being presented to you by a chronic lover of his own work, and one who spends long hours at his desk, all too rarely writing fun papers, and too often in small tasks...

## 2. Stanza 3

Turn with me to the third verse:

2.1. Preserve me from my calling's snare,

Every good thing can be a bad thing, and good things done from bad attitudes or for bad reasons have as part of their nature the nature of sin. Even the loftiest calling carries the potential for self- or vocational-idolatry. We need to hold each other accountable. Charles Wesley spells out some further things.

2.2. And hide my simple heart above,

2.3. Above the thorns of choking care,

2.4. The gilded baits of worldly love.

God is, we maintain, interested in and accessible to all those in the world, and home and work and in leisure. This is God's nature. This is how God engages us. It is how we seek to engage with God.

If there is a limitation with Wesley's *Forth in thy name, O Lord, I Go*, it is that it is written almost entirely in the first person singular. This may seem individualistic to us, but it is surely driven out of the sense of community which characterised early Methodism.

And so it is that the paper concludes with a call to holistic thinking as regards God's engagement in the world, and in the light of the place that work plays in life, service, worship and joy. If we are to step once more into the ubiquity of God's presence, we could do no better than to illustrate this at the extremity. If work was not outside Wesley's sense of God's presence, then neither can death be. Hence the wonderful hymn:

Ah, lovely appearance of death!  
No sight upon earth is so fair;  
Not all the gay pageants that breathe  
Can with a dead body compare:  
With solemn delight I survey  
The corpse when the spirit is fled;  
In love with the beautiful clay,  
And longing to lie in its stead.