

The Role of Leisure in the Christian Life

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I. Introduction: Historical and Current Christian Understandings of Leisure

The early Christian notion of *otium sanctum* or holy leisure was “A sense of balance in life, an ability to be at peace through the activities of the day, an ability to rest and take time to enjoy beauty, an ability to pace ourselves” (Foster, 1978, pp. 20-21). As Christian theology developed, Christian understandings of leisure were influenced by the Greek concept of *scholē*. Augustine (354-430 CE) identified three types of life: the active, the contemplative, and the mixed life of action and contemplation (Neville, 2004). His contemplative life of holy leisure that involved the investigation of truth was not only influenced by Greek thought but was also based on the tranquility of active rest in Christ (Heintzman, 1986; Neville, 2004). Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE), who devoted his life to the reconciliation of Aristotle’s thought and Christian faith, located Aristotle’s notion of leisure and contemplation in the blessed vision of God. The medieval monastic theme of *otium* was of biblical origin but also influenced by the Greek notion of *scholē*. This thread of *scholē* continues in Pieper (1963) whose philosophy and theology were heavily influenced by the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Although Pieper receives much attention within leisure studies, his view of leisure is typical of many Roman Catholic theologians and scholars (e.g., Doohan, 1990):

Leisure, it must be clearly understood, is a mental and spiritual attitude.... It is in the first place, an attitude of mind, a condition of the soul....For leisure is a receptive attitude of mind, a contemplative attitude, and it is not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation. (Pieper, pp. 40-41)

Although Christian versions of classical leisure such as expressed by Pieper (1963) continue to this day in the Roman Catholic Church, with the Reformation and the development of Protestant theology there was a move away from classical understandings of leisure to activity understandings. A contemporary Christian expression of the activity view was articulated by Protestant scholar Ryken (1995):

Its [leisure's] purpose is to bring us back to physical, mental, and emotional strength and wholeness...The purpose of leisure is to re-create a person, to restore him or her to an earlier condition. ...Leisure...is "the growing time of the human spirit" and a time "for rest and restoration, for rediscovering life in its entirety"...Leisure is, in the best sense of the word, an escape...Relaxation is one of the inherent qualities of leisure. (pp. 236, 261)

Christian understandings of leisure are not restricted to classical and activity views. Neville (2004) defined leisure as time: "Anything that might be called a theology of leisure must be a particular aspect of theology of freedom, because leisure, on any definition, is time freed from external constraints, at work or in social duties" (p. 100). More recently a number of Christian authors (Dahl, 2006; Heintzman, 1986, 1994; Joblin, 2009) have articulated a holistic understanding of leisure. For example, Dahl (2006) wrote:

Work and leisure are not distinct; they lie on a continuum.... Leisure is being able to combine work, worship, and recreation in a free and loving, holistic way which integrates these three elements as much as possible. Although a person goes to different places to perform different functions, leisure lies in integrating these three aspects in order to experience wholeness in one's life, family, and community. (p. 95)

From this brief review of Christian understandings of leisure, we can see that there is no one Christian understanding of leisure; multiple Christian views of leisure exist.

II. Biblical Principles

The word “leisure” (*scholē*) arose in Greek culture, and thus lexical words related to *scholē* are not prominent in the bible. One of the few occurrences is the Septuagint (i.e., the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures) translation of Psalm 46:10 where the Hebrew word is translated with the Greek word *scholē* so that in English the verse reads “Have leisure and know that I am God.” Hermeneutical research suggests that the verse is concerned with the spiritual attitude for a person’s basic posture in relation to God (Heintzman, 2009), and therefore fits with a spiritual understanding of leisure (e.g., Pieper, 1963). Although lexical words related to leisure are not prominent in the Christian tradition, writers have identified a number of biblical elements that may be used to develop a Christian understanding of leisure: the creation model (Lehman, 1974), creativity in the Old Testament (Spence, 1973), the principle of Sabbath rest (Heintzman, 2006; Johnston, 1983; Ryken, 1995), the image of God in play (Holmes, 1983), the advice of Qoheleth in the book of Ecclesiastes (Johnston, 1983), the Hebraic way of life (Johnston, 1983), the quality of life found in Jesus (Dahl, 1972), and the Kingdom of God (Holmes, 1983). This paper will highlight only a few of these biblical principles.

a) Sabbath-keeping

The Sabbath reminds us that there is more to life than work. In the creation account, the Sabbath points to a rhythm of work and nonwork (Gen. 1–2). The same Sabbath rhythm is suggested in the account of God’s provision of manna in the desert (Exod. 16), in the Mosaic law (Exod. 34:21; Lev. 23:1–3; Num. 28:18), and in the words of the prophets (Amos 8:5; Isa. 58:13–14). The Sabbath principle suggests that the rhythm of work and nonwork, or leisure, is necessary for our well-being. Jesus demonstrated this rhythm in his life on earth. During his ministry he regularly took time alone in the hills or solitary places to rest and pray (Mark 1:35; 6:31–32, 45).

In the Exodus account of the Sabbath commandment (20:8–11) we encounter the first reason God gives for observing the Sabbath: we should rest from our work just as God did after calling creation into being. The Sabbath was given not primarily for restorative purposes but was time to recognize that life is a gift from God and we are to respond with our worship and thanksgiving. Exodus 20:11 suggests that observing a day of rest forcefully reminds us that we live in a world that contains all we need as well as many other things to enjoy. So the Sabbath is an invitation to experience the blessings of God’s good gift of creation and delight in them. Leisure, like the Sabbath, is more than a time period or an activity; it is an attitude.

Deuteronomy’s version of the Sabbath commandment provides another reason why we are to stop working: “so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do” (5:14). The Sabbath, therefore, is for human rest, restoration, and re-creation. It is a “day of sacred assembly” (Lev. 23:3)—a day set aside to worship the One who created and sustains us. Jesus also taught that the Sabbath was a time for bringing healing and wholeness (Matt. 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–27; 3:1–5; Luke 6:1–4; 13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 9:1–41).

A third motivation for observing the Sabbath, a humanitarian one that we have already noted in Deuteronomy 5:14–15, is more clearly stated in the Book of the Covenant: “Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the foreigner among you as well, may be refreshed” (Exod. 23:12). In this verse the only purpose given for the day of rest is that the dependent laborers and domestic animals experience rest and recuperation. The Sabbath was especially for the benefit of those who are severely burdened with work and are under the orders of others. Our leisure activity needs to be respectful of other people as well as of God’s creatures and creation, and we should be careful not to intentionally or unintentionally exploit them during our leisure activity.

A fourth motivation for observance of the Sabbath is that it is a sign of the covenant: “The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever” (Exod. 31:16, 17a). Thus the Sabbath was to be observed not only within the context of a relationship with God, but it was a sign of the relationship. Applied to leisure, while some benefits may accrue from observance of one day’s rest in seven, leisure like the Sabbath may find its true meaning and reach its fullest potential when one lives in relationship with God. Taken together, the Exodus and Deuteronomy accounts of the Sabbath suggest that our leisure should be for both enjoying God and God’s creation, and for personal renewal.

b) Rest

Like the principle of Sabbath, the biblical concept of rest reminds us that there is more to life than work. Biblical rest includes a range of physical and spiritual dimensions: a pleasant, secure, and blessed life in the land (Deut. 12:9–10); an entering into God’s rest (Ps. 91:1); a rest of completion such as God enjoyed after creation (Gen. 2:2); a Sabbath rest of peace, joy, and well-being (Heb. 4:9–11); and a relief from labors and burdens, as well as a peace and contentment of body, soul, and mind in Jesus (Matt. 11:28–30).

While we may not fully experience all these physical and spiritual dimensions of rest until God’s kingdom has fully come, we can begin to experience them now. These elements of rest are part of the good life on God’s good earth, and they provide insights into how we understand leisure. The Deuteronomic notion of rest in the land is of particular importance for our understanding of leisure as activity, or what can be called intensified leisure. As Preece (1981) noted, “We don’t rest in a doctrine, we need a place to put our feet up, but a place in which God is personally present” (p. 79). God’s creation provides the context for our rest and leisure. God’s creation contains many good gifts for us to enjoy. The biblical themes of festivals, feasts, dance,

hospitality and friendships are all examples of leisure activities that provide an opportunity to enjoy God's good creation. These leisure activities may be seen as an intensification of leisure that nourishes our spiritual attitude of leisure and a leisurely approach to life.

In addition to a physical dimension, the biblical concept of rest also has a spiritual dimension, which suggests to us that leisure is more than recreation, more than leisure as activity. It also involves an attitude or a condition of our being. Leisure, in the classical sense, refers to an attitude or a state of being characterized by peace, contentment, joy, and celebration.

c) Work and Leisure Balance

The book of Ecclesiastes critiques those who distort God's intended rhythm of work and leisure by pursuing either a compulsive work ethic or a hedonistic leisure ethic based on consuming goods. The book points to an alternative for true disciples: enjoying the good life on the good earth God has given us. Throughout Ecclesiastes (2:17–26; 5:9–16; 6:7–9; esp. 4:4–16) the author emphasizes the folly of compulsive work and refutes three arguments often put forward in its support: the need to achieve (4:4); the desire for wealth (4:8); and the desire to gain fame (4:13–16). The conclusion is unavoidable—overwork is foolish, and moderation is sensible.

In Ecclesiastes, the writer addresses those who hold a hedonistic, consumptive leisure ethic. A life of unreserved pleasure-seeking and acquisition of possessions is “meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (2:1–11). Evidently, leisure activity that is focused on pleasure-seeking, on consumption and acquisition, or that becomes one's all-consuming end is ultimately not fulfilling.

The recommended lifestyle, in contrast to a compulsive work ethic and a hedonistic leisure ethic, comes at the end of Ecclesiastes 2. Here we learn that life is to be enjoyed: “People can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their toil” (v. 24). Commentators

suggest that this phrase stands for a contented and happy life characterized by joy, companionship, and satisfaction. The writer of Ecclesiastes further elaborates on the theme of enjoying the life God has given us (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–19; 9:7–9; 11:9–12:1). God has given humans the opportunity and the encouragement to enjoy the good life on God’s good earth.

This advice in Ecclesiastes to enjoy life reflects the Genesis account, in which God repeatedly pronounces the creation “good.” It also reflects the rejoicing in creation suggested by the Exodus account of the Sabbath commandment, and the orthodox Israelite view of the earthly realm, in which God brings “forth food from earth: wine that gladdens the human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts” (Ps. 104:14b–15).

Thus we should choose forms of leisure activity that allow us to see, hear, and experience the majesty of God’s creation. Such leisure activities are consistent with the ancient tradition of meditating on creation—a form of contemplation that the mystics called the “discovery of God in his creatures” (see Ps. 8; 19) and that help to develop the qualitative spiritual dimension of leisure that permeates all of life.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, these biblical passages teach us that leisure is part of God’s lifestyle for us: for rest; for renewal; and for learning about, appreciating, and enjoying God and God’s gift of creation. This understanding of leisure involves a spiritual attitude, time free from work, and leisure activities.

III. Questions

1. Can biblical principles such as Sabbath and rest be equated with leisure or is it better to use the biblical terms without reference to leisure?

2. Since leisure (*scholē*) was originally a Greek concept, can we speak of a Christian understanding of leisure?
3. When considering the different concepts of leisure (classical, activity, time, state of mind, holistic etc.) do the biblical principles support one concept more than another?

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