

---

# John Wesley on giving

---

Stewardship is at the heart of the Wesleyan revival, and John Wesley considered it an integral component of Christian discipleship. It was a consistent theme of his preaching and personal practice. Giving of financial resources was a necessary spiritual discipline of every member of the Wesleyan classes and societies. For Wesley, no one was exempt from the commandment to love God and neighbor, and giving was an expression of that love.

## Wesley and money

Toward the end of his life, Wesley's sermons and writings began reflecting a growing concern for the future of "the people called Methodist." The movement was numerically strong with about 50,000 in England, and the new American church was growing rapidly. However, Wesley saw signs of demise. A tour of Methodist work across Britain left him somewhat discouraged and pessimistic.

On Aug. 4, 1786, he wrote: "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out."

To Wesley, the most evident threat was the growing wealth of the Methodists. He believed that Christianity has within it the seeds of its own demise. Discipleship makes us more diligent and frugal, and as we become more diligent and frugal, wealth increases.

Wesley considered wealth and the failure to give the most serious threats to the Methodist movement in particular and Christianity in general. In 1789, Wesley noted that the Methodists had all but ignored the third point of his sermon on "The Use of Money," which had been printed some 30 years earlier. He wrote:

"Of the three rules which are laid down ... you may find many that observe the first rule, namely, 'Gain all you can.' You may find a few that observe the second, 'Save all you can.' But, how many have you found that observe the third rule, 'Give all you can'? Have you reason to believe that 500 of these are to be found among 50,000 Methodists? And yet nothing can be more plain than that all who observe the first rules without the third will be twofold more the children of hell than ever they were before."

Wesley's own commitment to giving was consistent throughout his life. As a student at Oxford, he lived on 28 pounds a year. As his earnings increased to 30 and eventually to 120 pounds annually, he continued to live on the same 28 pounds. He told people that if at his death he had more than 10 pounds in his possession, they could call him a robber.

## Wesley's rules regarding wealth

Wesley wrote in 1786 in "Thoughts upon Methodism":

*"... the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence, they proportionately increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.*

*"... What way, then, (I ask again) can we take, that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who 'gain all they can,' and 'save all they can,' will likewise 'give all they can;' then, the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven."*

Wesley's sermon "The Use of Money" is a helpful starting point. The rules outlined are integral to his theological, ethical and missional agenda.

**"Earn all you can."** Do we need any admonition to earn all we can? However, Wesley was not giving a theological rationale for an aggressive acquisitiveness. Rather, he emphasized earning all you can through participating in God's healing and creative work in the world. His sermon is a polemic against destructive ways of earning money by hurting oneself or others or the creation. He emphasizes restrictions on exploiting others or gaining from the pain and suffering of others or of oneself. Giving in the Wesleyan tradition considers how we earn the wealth, not just how we use the wealth earned.

**"Save all you can."** Wesley challenges, rather than endorses, accumulating and hoarding. He was not calling the Methodists to invest wisely and build large savings accounts; he compared such practices to "throwing your money into the sea."

The maxim "save all you can" is a call to a simplified lifestyle, a warning against extravagance, opulence and self-gratification. Wesley considered anything we have that is unnecessary as having been extracted from the blood of the poor. Foregoing acquisitiveness in order for the poor to live is a form of giving.

Are we willing to simplify our living so that others may simply live? Stewardship has to do with what we are willing to do without as surely as it has to do with what we are willing to acquire.

**"Give all you can."** Wesley's third rule of stewardship gives meaning to the first two. We are to gain all we can and save all we can so that we can give all we can. In Wesley's own words: "Save all you can, by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire, to gratify either the desire of the flesh, the

desire of the eye, or the pride of life. Waste nothing ... on sin or folly, whether for yourself or your children. And then, give all you can, or in other words give all you have to God." Earning, saving, giving are all means of giving oneself to God!

Giving, for Wesley, is rooted in the very nature and activity of God, whose nature is love, which is the emptying of oneself on behalf of others, the giving of life, abundant and full life. Grace, God's unmerited love poured out to humanity supremely in Jesus Christ, is who God is. Love for God, therefore, inevitably involves giving of oneself to God and the neighbor. One cannot love and fail to give!

Wesley observed that wealth changes our priorities and our relationships. We begin to assume an unrealistic independence and self-reliance. We forget how to receive and how to give. Wesley believed that true religion never goes from the powerful to the weak, but from the weak to the powerful. He found the poor more responsive to the gospel than the wealthy.

His understanding of God as one who is especially present with the poor and his own relationships with the poor shaped Wesley's rules for giving. His concern for the poor was holistic. Yes, he preached the gospel to them, called them to conversion and nurtured them in class meetings. He also developed a free health clinic and started a school, a sewing cooperative and a lending agency for the poor. They were his friends and special friends of Jesus, so giving to them and for them as a means of serving Christ was his lifelong passion.

Affluence, according to Wesley, tends to separate us from the poor – and from God and the motivation for giving. Giving to alleviate the suffering of the poor is a joyful passion and a glad participation in Christ's ministry.

### **Giving in the Wesleyan tradition**

Giving must be more than a response to an appeal to general humanitarianism. It must be rooted and grounded theologically and missionally.

**Giving is rooted in God's very being.** The ability to give itself is a gift from God. All life is grace, a free, unearned gift from a giving God who invites us to share in the divine life and mission of giving. We are stewards and a steward is one who insures that all have a place at the table of God's provisions. God has graciously invited us to share in God's own life and activity by calling us to make sure the human family has all things necessary in order to flourish.

**Giving is indispensable to Christian discipleship.** Giving is part of holy living. While the class meetings originated as a means of collecting money for the poor, they became communities of grace in which people were held in love and held accountable for holy living. Growth in discipleship inevitably includes growth in giving.

**Giving includes more than the products of our labor.** Disciplined living in response to the needs of the world is a form of giving. We give by refusing to take from others what is necessary for their abundant life. Giving in the Wesleyan tradition includes joyfully sharing the fruits of our labor and management with others, especially the poor.

**Giving involves friendship with the poor.** Wesley considered regular visitation of the poor as indispensable for Christian discipleship and spiritual formation as daily prayer and regular celebration of Holy Communion. He admonished the Methodists to deliver their aid to the poor, instead of sending it. Renewal will not come to United Methodism or any other church apart from welcoming the poor into the center of the church's life. Giving will not substantially increase unless and until we who have resources see the world's impoverished as members of our own family, as Jesus said they are.

**Giving moves beyond individual charity to building communities of shalom – communities of interconnectedness, justice and compassion.** Charity itself can be a paternalistic means of control. Justice, however, is what God requires. Wesley, though sometimes exhibiting a paternalistic attitude toward the poor, attempted to deal with their plight holistically. He made no distinction between delivering them medical care and proclaiming the gospel. One was not social service and the other evangelism. Both were good news.

His outspoken resistance to the slave trade, alcohol traffic, excessive interest charged to the poor and other staples of British economic life in the 18th century expressed his stewardship. The Wesleyan tradition includes giving our voices on behalf of the voiceless, giving our insights and influence to build communities that reflect God's reign of justice, generosity and joy.

## Conclusion

Giving for Wesley was a means of expressing generosity rooted in gratitude for God's generosity and a means of fulfilling the great commandment to love God and neighbor. He was convinced that if the Methodists would give all they can, then all would have enough. Stewardship is gift-full living so that all God's children have a place at the table of abundance.

Wesley's own words are a fitting conclusion:

*"(Money) is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked. It gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of a husband to the widow, and of a father for the fatherless; we may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain. It may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death."*

*This article is adapted from addresses that **Bishop Kenneth L. Carder** (retired) delivered to the Giving and the Gospel Symposium in 1997 and the United Methodist Summit on Christian Stewardship in 2003. As bishop, he served the Nashville and Mississippi areas and now lives in Chaplin, South Carolina, where he serves as chaplain in a memory care unit.*

## Related Tags

**Wesleys**

**Giving**

United Methodist Communications is an agency of The United Methodist Church

©2024 United Methodist Communications. All Rights Reserved