

The Root of Busyness and Its Counter-Cultural Cure

Kirk Hadden (M.Div., Intercultural Studies, 2009)

*Originally presented as a spring 2009 AGTS course paper for
"Building the Disciple Making Ministry" with Dr. Stephen Lim.*

A pervasive sense of hurry and urgency drives contemporary Americans to be more efficient, to get more done, to do more things, and do it all at once. From CEOs to high school students, most people concede that their lives are constantly characterized by one word: busyness. Yet most people express pain over that fact, longing instead for rest and a slower pace of life.

Due to an economic structure that rewards hard work, the United States has the largest economy of any single nation in the world.¹ However, the frenetic lifestyle of many Americans seems to be breaking new thresholds. People are working more, and more people are working.² Even when not in the office, technology connects Americans to work while at home in the evening, on the weekends, and even on vacation. Leisure time is also busy, filled with more and more activity and a sense that there are always more obligations than time.

Excessive busyness impinges on health. Dr. Archibald Hart expects that in the near future stress-related diseases will be the leading cause of death in the United States.³ A constant state of hurry causes the body to exist in a continuous mode of emergency, which can result in enormous physiological and psychological damage. The pace of modern life rarely allows for rest, especially the kind of rest the human body truly needs to relax and heal itself.⁴ In addition to diseases directly caused by stress,

Americans also lack the sleep and exercise they need to remain healthy. Richard Swenson notes that in 1850, the average American regularly slept nine and a half hours per night. Today, it is closer to seven and still dropping.⁵

Busyness also takes a severe toll on human relationships. In her landmark study, *The Overworked American*, Juliet Schor noted the effect of Americans' increased busyness on family relationships. Half of those surveyed reported that they did not have enough time for their families.⁶ Her study showed that between 1960 and 1986, the time parents had available to spend with their children dropped by at least ten hours per week; it is likely that this fact is highly linked to the significant increase in troubled teenagers over the same period.⁷ Busyness can have drastic effects on marriage as well. Surely the lack of time spouses spend with each other in two-income families is strongly linked to the huge increase in divorce over the last several decades.

Busyness is the enemy of the American soul. According to Dr. Siang-Yang Tan,

The enemy of our souls
knows full well how hurry
sickness or unrest can
ultimately destroy us. He will
do his best to keep us from
God's rest. He entices us to
drive ourselves onward,

create ever more activity, fill our emptiness with external stimuli to avoid the disquiet in our soul.⁸

Carl Jung wrote, “Hurry is not *of* the devil; hurry *is* the devil.”⁹ Spiritual maturity and discipleship take time. Just like relationships with family, a deep relationship with God requires unhurried time away from the many distractions of life. A life of love requires “interruptibility”—the ability to pause and react with love to spontaneous needs that do not appear on a schedule.

The Cultural Subversions behind Busyness

Most busy people are, in fact, aware of the harmful effects of “hurry sickness.” They complain about their busy lifestyle and express a longing for rest and a slower pace. Why, then, do Americans continue to feel so busy? More is at work than meets the eye. The path to a healthier, slower life in which deep discipleship can occur requires an understanding of the underlying forces that drive Americans to ever-increasing busyness.

The Economics of Busyness

A short history of busyness in the modern world provides helpful insights. Before the industrial revolution, even the lowest classes of society had plenty of free time.¹⁰ Agricultural work included brief periods of strenuous, long hours, but also many periods of slowness and easier labor. In fact, when eighteenth century merchants tried to increase productivity from rural agricultural workers by having them work at weaving cloth in the winter, workers generally preferred to have more free time with family than to earn more money. In order to get employees to work more, employers discovered that the best way was to reduce

wages until employees were forced to work more to support their families.¹¹

The progression continued throughout the industrial revolution, increasing the work day to twelve to fourteen hours a day, six days a week. In response, labor unions throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries organized to reduce work hours. They were largely successful, managing to reduce the work week to eight hours per day, five days a week, resulting in the modern, forty-hour standard.¹²

Interestingly, the effort to reduce the workday ultimately found friends among employers as well, who observed that shorter work days actually benefitted the company. More rest meant workers who worked harder and safer. More importantly, economists observed that demand for products could be increased if the average consumer had more time off work in which to spend their money. The strategy worked. In fact, “Americans have been found to spend more time shopping than anyone else. They also spend a higher fraction of the money they earn.”¹³

This transition changed the meaning of leisure. In the past, leisure meant slowing down, spending time with family, relaxing contemplatively in nature, and attending to other mental and spiritual concerns. Today, although working hours have decreased, it is for another purpose—so that workers have time to spend their hard-earned money. The overall result is that even leisure time is *busy*. The busyness of non-working hours continues to increase with technological developments and the ever-increasing availability of hyper-sensory entertainment.¹⁴

Furthermore, because leisure time is now associated with spending, workers are

motivated to work even more so they can spend more. In a curious twist, after World War II, American unions began pressing for more opportunities to work overtime, while in Europe, unions fought for and won a 35-hour workweek and longer vacations. Currently, every year the average American worker works approximately nine more weeks than workers in France or Germany.

Pride and Shame

“Time is money” became a famous yet unlikely equation in American culture. To a large extent, money represents status and power in American society. Consequently, pride, another subtle cultural subversion, draws people into perpetual motion. Sociologist Robert Levine explains that the equation of money with time means that time becomes governed by the economic law of supply and demand: “The busier a person is, the more valuable is [his or her] time.”¹⁵ Levine explains the social consequences:

People wait longer and pay more for those whose time is scarce. Busy lawyers and performers ... not only charge more for their services but people are willing to wait longer to see them. Important people are usually seen by appointment only; and while those of higher status are allowed to make people below them wait, the reverse is strictly prohibited.¹⁶

Therefore, being (or appearing) busy is a way of exhibiting one’s importance.

On the contrary, wasting time is demonized. Endless numbers of advertisements, seminars, and popular magazine articles focus on ways to multi-task, to work and

play more efficiently, and to do things more quickly. Society exudes a persistent sense that anything less is irresponsible, foolish, or lazy. Busyness implies one’s importance and productivity as a member of society; free time implies that one is not contributing the full measure expected of a citizen.

The Burden of Endless Opportunity

Sociologist Liah Greenfeld identifies an additional underlying factor. Having studied cultures going through troubled economic times, she noticed that even workers who must work long hours do not necessarily express a sense of busyness. Instead, they had one goal each day: provide for the family. When they had done all they could do for the day, they expressed a sense of completion and could rest.¹⁷

Americans still work more than other nations, but actually work far less than in times past. Despite this reality, people experience an ever-growing sense of busyness. Greenfeld states that this reality has a lot to do with identity and freedom of choice. In tough economic times, people do not experience freedom of choice—circumstances establish one’s identity. People must provide for their family; once provision is made, they may rest. Modern Americans, however, experience a sense of unlimited freedom. Therefore, Americans endeavor to find the path that best suits them as an individual. Americans sense the freedom to choose their own identity and, therefore, feel a tremendous burden to find the *right* identity. Americans feel busy as they “go shopping for identities, try them on, accumulate them—and become oh so very busy.”¹⁸

In other words, Americans are not simply seeking *one* identity but are simply taking on more. A woman experiences multiple job descriptions: parent, spouse, sibling, friend,

athlete, computer expert, artist, etc. For each of these roles, she feels a list of accompanying obligations. After work hours, “leisure time” becomes a time to fulfill this list of self-imposed obligations. So instead of relaxing and enjoying time off, she approaches it as yet another to-do list, one which is never finished.¹⁹ Unlimited freedom results in unlimited responsibility to define one’s own identity. “We have become walking résumés. If you’re not doing something, you’re not creating and defining who you are.”²⁰ To be less than busy is to admit one’s limits to the world.

The result is a generation of Americans too busy to live the Christian life. The American economic structure encourages the endless cycle of working harder to earn more money to spend more money. Americans are busy because the culture values busyness as a status symbol. In contrast, free time is looked down upon as a *waste* of time, a waste of life. Any “rest” time is seen in a utilitarian sense as a way to work more productively later. Americans are busy because the culture advertises unlimited freedom of identity and choice; therefore, Americans feel an anxiety and a need to define who they are by what they are able to accomplish.

Sabbath: A Counter-Cultural Gift from God

The Bible, however, does not value busyness and productivity the way Americans do. Instead, it values peace and relationships—both with God and others—that often require significant amounts of time and a pace that would feel abysmally slow to most Americans. The Bible also values rest, not in utilitarian terms, but as good and meaningful in and of itself. The concept of Sabbath wraps up the biblical value of slowness and rest.

Sabbath in the Old Testament

From the very beginning, God himself carefully and emphatically laid down a pattern of intentional rest. Many helping professionals, such as counselors, doctors, and ministers, feel a constant responsibility to help others, but the Bible speaks of a Creator God who rests—despite the fact that the existence of the entire universe is sustained by Him. God does not rest because He’s grown tired or in order to work more efficiently later but because there is inherent meaning and value in rest. Jürgen Moltmann writes,

God does not “rest” in the sense of taking a break now and then, in order to gather strength for further tasks. ... This rest, this joy, this simple being-there on the Sabbath is the meaning of God’s entire work ... For the sake of this celebration everything which exists was created.²¹

God’s rest becomes the pattern of the Sabbath for the Jewish people. Of all the commandments in the Decalogue, the command to keep the Sabbath is the longest, comprising almost a third of the passage:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and

earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exod. 20:8-11).²²

It is also the most frequently repeated of any of the 613 commandments given in the law.²³

The Sabbath was not a suggestion or merely good advice; the penalty for breaking the Sabbath was capital punishment. This may seem harsh to modern Americans, but it strictly enforced a pattern of rest for the Jewish people, not only for kings and aristocrats, but also the lowest of slaves and even for animals. Without God's command for strict enforcement of the Sabbath, the lower classes might never have received an opportunity for humanness, rest, and relationship.

Sabbath in the New Testament

Today, the Sabbath is often seen as the Jewish people's great gift to the world. Abraham Lincoln admonished, "As we keep or break the Sabbath, we nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope by which man rises." Henry George, the nineteenth century political economist, wrote, "I believe that the institution of the Sabbath is one of the greatest benefits the human race ever had."²⁴

Why, then, have American Christians so abandoned the practice of a weekly Sabbath rest, even more so than their secular counterparts? Though referred to by some Christians as the "Christian Sabbath," Sunday can scarcely be called a "day of rest" for most Christians actively involved in their churches, and certainly not for ministers. Instead, true to the busyness of the culture, activity marks the church and

the events of each Sunday. When church functions are over, Christians are off to do the weekly shopping before returning home to catch up on household chores. Why did the solemn blessing of the Jewish Sabbath never make it into modern, American Christianity?

A terrible misreading of the New Testament provides the most likely explanation. The Gospel accounts share numerous instances where Jesus challenged the established religious practices, especially concerning the Sabbath. To the consternation of many Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus publicly healed on the Sabbath. Once, after having healed a paralyzed man, He told him to pick up his mat and walk—activities strictly limited by pharisaical tradition. At other times, Jesus and His disciples picked heads of grain to eat since they were hungry.

Christians commonly interpret these actions to mean that Jesus did not keep the Sabbath, and did not intend His followers to keep it either. They also point to Jesus' saying, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). However, even as this verse reveals, Jesus was not arguing against the practice of the Sabbath, but against the legalistic interpretation that had robbed it of its essential meaning. The pharisaical tradition had converted the Sabbath from a day for healing and rest to a day of legalistic burden and religious work. Jesus' correction pointed to the true intention of Sabbath rest—an ideal time for healing and rest, not for God's benefit but for that of humankind.

In fact, Jesus provides a model for rest. Despite the short length of His ministry, the Gospel writers note the many occasions in which Jesus "would withdraw to desolate places and pray" (Luke 5:16). Many times, Jesus did so alone, but at other times He

brought His disciples into that place of rest as well. In Mark 6:31, the disciples had just returned from the preaching mission on which Jesus had sent them, and “many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” In response, Jesus invites them to “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while” (v. 31b).

As the gospel entered new contexts within the Roman Empire, it encountered new challenges. In Judea, the world still stopped on the Sabbath day, which made it easy for Jews to practice the Sabbath, even if tradition had changed its meaning. In Greek and Roman contexts, however, not every laborer was given such opportunity. Paul’s letter to the church in Rome seems to indicate that not all Christians were practicing the Sabbath (Rom. 14:5-6).

Many Christians assume that Paul dismissed the Sabbath. Indeed, in several places Paul warns against judging others based on whether or not they kept the Sabbath.²⁵ However, he does not eliminate the concept of Sabbath. For Paul, the Sabbath foreshadows the fulfillment of rest in Christ (Col. 2:17). Therefore, Christians are not bound to a legalistic interpretation of the Sabbath, but still receive its benefit. In fact, the fulfillment of Sabbath rest in Christ invites Christians to enter rest even more deeply.

The Sabbath for American Christians

What, then, does Sabbath mean for modern American Christians? Certainly it should not take on the legalism of Jesus’ day. As Paul advised, it also need not be practiced on any particular day. However, the depth of meaning and the value of the Sabbath, as expressed in the Old Testament, are to be consummated in Christ, not lost. In Christ, Christians may reinterpret the Sabbath in an even broader sense, applying it to life as a

whole, rather than limiting it to a single timeframe. In whatever way Christians practice the Sabbath, it must include a period of regular, genuine rest which incorporates a time for guilt-free relaxation from work of all kinds. It is not a time to “catch up” on housework or other chores. It is a time for simple enjoyment of life and creation.

The Christian practice of Sabbath must also include a drastic, counter-cultural slowing of pace. Busyness is incompatible with the model of ministry and spirituality exemplified in Christ. The American sense of endless obligation and need for multi-tasking prevents the kind of slowness which spiritual growth requires. “Holiness can only be experienced by providing it with the occasion, which is setting aside all other preoccupations.”²⁶ John Ortberg reports a conversation in which he asked his spiritual mentor what was necessary to become spiritually healthy. In response, his mentor advised him, “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.”²⁷ The practice of Christian Sabbath today must include this ruthless elimination of hurry.

Richard Swenson suggests the concept of “margin.” Many Americans overbook their time, budget, body, and emotions. When running at 100 percent or more, any interruption to the schedule, any unplanned delay, or even an unexpected opportunity, causes stress and pain rather than the Christ-like response of love. Instead, Swenson suggests that people should intentionally leave wide “margins” in their time and energy so that when the unexpected happens, there is room to breathe—room to respond with love.²⁸

The Christian practice of Sabbath also challenges American believers to increase their biblical understanding of *calling* in

order to counter the cultural temptation to endlessly explore their own potential. The culture presses for constant expansion of identity—always in activity—in order to prove one’s worth and stature by personal accomplishments. By understanding one’s call, however, a Christian can eliminate the unnecessary pursuits that distract from the most needful. The Sabbath invites the Christian to admit one’s limits and refocus on God’s true purposes for life. Perhaps Christians have lost the sense of call without the benefit of solitude with God required to find it.

Conclusion

The practice of the Sabbath is profoundly counter-cultural. It rebels against America’s constant busyness, which is based on materialism. It requires that believers

humble themselves and admit their limitations to God and the world. Christians must define themselves by something other than their work or personal accomplishments. Adhering to a Sabbath rest necessitates a trust in God, rather than self, for daily provision. It causes people to value relationship with God and others above work *and* entertainment. Sabbath rest asks believers to unplug from the lights, glitter, and constant activity of the world—to shut out the noise—so they can hear the quiet voice of God. It asks a person to slow down enough to peer into his or her own soul and deal with the difficult things of the heart that one effectively ignores due to the constant buzz of activity. Ultimately, Sabbath rest invites believers to share in God’s magnificent rest.

Works Cited

- Central Intelligence Agency. "United States." *The World Factbook*.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html> (accessed April 28, 2009).
- Cross, Gary. "A Right to Be Lazy? Busyness in Retrospective." *Social Research* 72, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 263-286.
- Davis, Ellen F. "Sabbath: The Culmination of Creation." *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 1998): 6-7.
- Greenfeld, Liah. "When the Sky is the Limit: Busyness in Contemporary American Society." *Social Research* 72, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 315-338.
- Hart, Archibald D. *The Hidden Link between Adrenaline and Stress*. Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 1995.
- Horne, Martha J. "Sabbath and Compassion." *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 1998): 22-23.
- Levine, Robert. "A Geography of Busyness." *Social Research* 72, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 355-370.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. "Sabbath: Finishing and Beginning." *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 1998): 4-5.
- Ortberg, John. *The Life You've Always Wanted*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.
- Schor, Juliet. *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.
- Swenson, Richard. *The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998.
- Tan, Siang-Yang. *Rest: Experiencing God's Peace in a Restless World*. Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 2000.

¹Central Intelligence Agency, "United States" *The World Factbook*,
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html> (accessed April 23, 2009).

²Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 3-15

³Archibald D. Hart, *The Hidden Link Between Adrenaline and Stress* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 1995), 3.

⁴*Ibid.*, 36-41.

⁵Richard Swenson, *The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1998)

-
- ⁶Schor, 11.
- ⁷Ibid., 13.
- ⁸Siang-Yang Tan, *Rest: Experiencing God's Peace in a Restless World* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 2000), 25.
- ⁹John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002), 77.
- ¹⁰Schor, 10.
- ¹¹Gary Cross, "A Right to Be Lazy? Busyness in Retrospective," *Social Research* 72, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 264.
- ¹²Cross, 263-288.
- ¹³Schor, 2.
- ¹⁴Cross, 263-288.
- ¹⁵Robert Levine, "A Geography of Busyness," *Social Research* 72, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 368.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Liah Greenfeld, "When the Sky is the Limit: Busyness in Contemporary American Society," *Social Research* 72, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 319.
- ¹⁸Ibid., 337.
- ¹⁹Ibid.
- ²⁰Schor, quoting a "time-use expert," 23.
- ²¹Jürgen Moltmann, "Sabbath: Finishing and Beginning," *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 1998): 4.
- ²²Unless otherwise states, all Scripture references are taken from the ESV.
- ²³Ellen F. Davis, "Sabbath: The Culmination of Creation," *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 1998): 6.
- ²⁴Quoted in "Quotations," *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 1998): 32.
- ²⁵See Colossians 2:16 and Romans 14:5.
- ²⁶Niels-Erick Andreasen, quoted by Martha J. Horne, "Sabbath and Compassion," *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 1998): 22.
- ²⁷Ortberg, 76.
- ²⁸Richard A. Swenson, *The Overload Syndrome* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 15.