Giving from a Wesleyan Perspective

Earn all you can
Save all you can
Give all you can

A Study Paper By
Bishop Kenneth L. Carder
Giving from a Wesleyan Perspective

by

Bishop Kenneth L. Carder

Giving and the Gospel Symposium
October 23, 1997
Nashville, Tennessee

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Used by permission. All rights reserved.
INTRODUCTION

My attention perked up at a civic club meeting several years ago when a very successful local entrepreneur said, "I owe my financial success to John Wesley. I have followed his formula, and it works. Wesley said that we are to earn all we can and save all we can. If we earn and save, we have capital to invest in new ventures." Since he was a member of the congregation I served and I knew something of his giving level to the church, it was obvious that he knew just enough about Wesley to be dangerous. I later preached a sermon entitled, "On Being Two-Thirds Wesleyan." The sermon was not nearly as popular as the entrepreneur's speech to the Rotarians.

A local church newsletter carried this announcement: "Back by popular demand: 'Save All You Can.'" The article read, "The next sessions of the popular seminar sponsored by the work area on stewardship will be at 7 p.m. Monday, July 21, and Wednesday, July 23... The seminar is based on the second part of John Wesley's personal financial package, 'Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.' Led by (a financial and invest-

I suspect that had the entrepreneur and the financial planner read Wesley's sermons on wealth and stewardship, they would have looked elsewhere for names to drop in support of their agendas. However, you are to be commended for dropping Wesley into the agenda of a symposium entitled "Giving and the Gospel." Wesley clearly understood the relationship between the gospel and giving. And failure to place the emphasis on Wesley's third component, "give all you can," is to use Wesley to endorse the very things he resisted. This symposium has rightly captured the essence of what Ted Jennings calls "Wesley's evangelical economics" under the title "Giving and the Gospel." One cannot adequately understand or appropriate Wesley apart from his convictions and practices regarding money and its use.
The most evident threat, according to Wesley, was the growing wealth of the Methodists. Wesley believed, as he expressed in several sermons, most noticeable being "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," 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. He observed: "Wherever riches have increased (exceeding few are the exceptions), the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore, do I not see how it is possible ... for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger and love of the world in all its branches." ("Thoughts Upon Methodism")

Wesley considered wealth and the "failure to give" the most serious threats to the Methodist movement in particular and Christianity in general. The Methodist movement would fail and continue only as a dead sect if the Methodists forgot how to give. By 1789, two years before his death, Wesley noted that the Methodists had all but ignored the third point of his sermon on "The Use of Money," which was printed some 30 years before. He wrote in 1789:

"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 two first rules without the third will be twofold more the children of hell than ever they were before."
Wesley’s personal commitment to giving, however, remained consistent throughout his life. As a student at Oxford, Wesley lived on 28 pounds. He earned 30 pounds, so he gave away two pounds. As his earnings increased, he continued to live on the same 28 pounds. When he earned 120 pounds, he gave away 92 pounds. Wesley wrote to his sister, “Money never stays with me. It would bum me if it did. I throw it out of my hands as soon as possible, lest it should find its way into my heart.” He told the people that if at his death he had more than 10 pounds in his possession, they could call him a robber. Richard Heitzenrater reminds us that at his death, Wesley was borne to his grave by six paupers, who were paid one pound each, thus depleting his resources. Even the draperies used in the memorial service were taken down, sewn into dresses and distributed to poor women in London.

WESLEY’S RULES REGARDING WEALTH

Wesley wrote in 1786:

“How, then, is it possible that Methodism, that is, the religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently, they increase in goods. Hence, they proportionably 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.” (“Thoughts Upon Methodism”)