

Getting Into Shape: My Health Initiative for 2009

Sunday, February 8, 2009

I Corinthians 6:19-20

Luke 4:18-19

by Dr. Frank Trotter

St. Paul said, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” (I Corinthians 6:19-20)

Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

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Today’s sermon is the third in a four part series on getting into shape.

According to a July 2003 article in the *Hattiesburg American*, “Benjamin Franklin devised a week-by-week plan to improve his character by working on 13 virtues. Franklin’s sharp focus, meticulous record keeping, and diligent work yielded improvements in the first 12 virtues — temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, tranquility, cleanliness and chastity. However, he found that every time he began to make progress in developing humility, he got proud of it!”¹

Benjamin Franklin was not the only member of his generation who sought to find a balance in his life. Franklin’s lifespan almost exactly parallels that of one of his contemporaries across the Atlantic, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Tradition. Wesley was born in 1703 and Franklin in 1706, with Franklin dying in 1790 and Wesley in 1791.

¹ Quoted at Homiletics Online,
http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=Benjamin+Franklin.

Wesley is well-known for his sermons and theological writings, but many are surprised to learn that he was fascinated by issues of health and hygiene. Stephen Tomkins, the author of a Wesley biography published in 2003, tells us that “An early manifestation of [Wesley’s interest in health] came with his reading, in November 1724, of a book entitled *Health and Long Life* by one Dr. Cheyne. The doctor prescribed a regimen of strict moderation in food and drink, supported by sleep and good exercise. Wesley had had small opportunity for anything other than moderation so far in his life, but he responded to the book with great enthusiasm, and it shaped his thinking for the rest of his life. Between now and his evangelical conversion, he was to develop an ever more severely ascetic spirituality, but even after that, the value of self-discipline and a simple lifestyle would always be of the utmost importance for him.”²

Twenty-three years later, Wesley wrote his own book entitled, *Primitive Physick, or An Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*. He was self-conscious enough as a theologian writing about medicine and health that he published it anonymously, finally allowing his name to be added to the title page thirteen years later.

In the preface of this work, I found several fascinating words of advice and counsel that might be found in any number of current best sellers on diet and health. On the importance of a healthy home where we spend most of our hours, he writes: “Everyone that would preserve health should be as clean and sweet as possible in their houses, clothes, and furniture...”³

On our eating habits, Wesley has a lot to say. For example, he writes: “The great rule of eating and drinking is to suit the quality and quantity of food to the strength of the digestion; to take always such a sort and such a measure of food as sits light and easy on the stomach... Nothing conduces more to health than abstinence and plain food, with due labor... Water is the wholesomest of all drinks; it quickens the appetite and strengthens the

² Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 22.

http://books.google.com/books?id=3IEFf8BH6IgC&pg=PA22&lpg=PA22&dq=John+Wesley+on+moderation&source=web&ots=niNAeja3DE&sig=OM8SC2Syyk0tRpcLxIWWhSTbidYo&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=7&ct=result#PPA5.M1.

³ John Wesley, from the Preface for *Primitive Physick, or An Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*, Board of Global Ministries web site, The United Methodist Church, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/primitive-physick/>.

digestion most. Strong, and more especially, spirituous liquors, are a certain, though slow poison....”⁴

On the importance of exercise, Wesley says: “A due degree of exercise is indispensably necessary to health and long life. Walking is the best exercise for those who are able to bear it... The open air, when the weather is fair, contributes much to the benefit of exercise. We may strengthen any weak part of the body by constant exercise...”⁵

On our emotional health, Wesley writes: “The passions have a greater influence upon health than most people are aware of. All violent and sudden passions dispose to, or actually throw people into acute diseases. The slow and lasting passions, such as grief and hopeless love, bring on chronic diseases. Till the passion, which caused the disease, is calmed, medicine is applied in vain.”⁶

This emphasis on finding a balance between one’s physical, spiritual, and emotional health lies at the foundation of Wesleyan theology and practice. He often quoted St. Paul’s words in the first letter to the Corinthians: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” (I Corinthians 6:19-20)

Many have described Jesus’ ministry as “holistic.” When he preached in the synagogue as recorded in Luke’s gospel, he quoted the prophet Isaiah in referring to this spiritual balance: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” From the gospel narratives, we know that he ministered to the “whole person.” The effects of his healing were experienced physically, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. He was concerned about the healing of the whole of creation.

Several days ago, I Googled a variety of words in preparation for this sermon. Among them were “health,” “healing,” and “religion.” Among the results I was startled to find an article that appeared in the *New York Times*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

on January 9th entitled, “When Serving the Lord, Ministers Are Often Found to Neglect Themselves.” I was looking for articles about you all, and I found one about me.

It seems that the Divinity School at Duke University initiated a health initiative for United Methodist clergy last year that assesses what kind of shape they are in. Duke is going to spend \$12 million over seven years because they believe United Methodist clergy who are supposed to be setting examples for being in good all around shape are in fact in declining health themselves. If clergy are over eating themselves, they’re less likely to preach on the sin of gluttony and over eating. If clergy aren’t exercising, they’re less likely to mention it to anyone. If clergy are out of shape, they’re more likely to enter into a co-dependency with their congregation to be out of shape together.

It seems that in seeking to serve others, clergy end up neglecting themselves. Very few congregations have the honesty to tell their faithful clergy that they weigh a pound or two, or five, or ten, or fifty pounds more than they should. The author of the *New York Times* writes, “While medical studies in various denominations indicate that clergy members live longer than comparable civilians, an emerging body of evidence over the last two decades has shown that ministers are more vulnerable to diabetes, depression, hypertension, gastrointestinal distress and heart problems. Put another way, these are the sort of ailments that can arise from the combination of a hectic schedule and too many fellowship suppers... But for his followers in the Methodist ministry today -- incessantly on call through e-mail or cellphone, fearful of offending the congregant offering homemade pie, fretting over every \$20 or \$30 medical co-pay – [John] Wesley [who regularly fasted as part of his own health regimen] has become a distant paragon.”⁷

The troubling news is that it would seem that many clergy and many congregations across the United States have entered into an unspoken co-dependency to stay out of shape, rather than in shape.

⁷ Samuel G. Freedman, “When Serving the Lord, Ministers Are Often Found to Neglect Themselves”, *New York Times*, January 9, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/10/us/10religion.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=clergy%20+%20self-care&st=cse.

A man walks into the hospital and says to the desk nurse, "I need to see the eye-ear doctor." "There is no such doctor" she tells him. "Perhaps you would like to see someone else?" "No, I need to see an eye-ear doctor," he says. "But there is no such doctor," she replies. "We have doctors for the eyes and doctors for the ear, nose and throat, but no eye-ear doctor." But the man would have none of it insisting on seeing the eye-ear doctor. Finally the nurse said, "If there was such a thing as an eye-ear doctor, why would you want to see him?" "Because," he replies, "I keep hearing one thing and seeing another."

Sometimes we in the church even get stuck in doing everything else but what we should be doing to get in shape. I would like to challenge you to make an appointment with your doctor in the next month and ask what needs to be on your list; and then I would like to challenge you to get busy working on your home work to honor your body as one of God's temples. I'm in that process now. I've agreed to eat healthier and eat less fast food, to get more sleep, to work out at the gym twice as often as I do now, and to work on my stress level when I obsess with worrying.

The hopeful news for all of us is that the Divinity School at Duke and many experts are asking all of us to be proactive, to create our individual health initiative for 2009. And there lies our hope: that by the end of 2009 we will be in better shape than we are now; that we will have learned to eat less and to eat healthier; that we will be serious about exercise.

John Wesley concludes the Preface to his 1747 book on health by giving us the solution for our health initiative. He says, "The love of God, as it is the sovereign remedy of all miseries, so in particular it effectually prevents all the bodily disorders the passions introduce, by keeping the passions themselves within due bounds; and by the unspeakable joy and perfect calm serenity and tranquility it gives the mind; it becomes the most powerful of all the means of health and long life."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.