

# Rest in a Restless Society – A Godly Counterpoint to Busyness and Burnout

Author: Peter Houston

Date: 25.08.2010

Category: Media & Technology, Children & Youth, Forming Leaders

I remember a few years ago we ran a youth camp over Easter. We had nearly all of our campers sign up for a workshop on "Burnout" run by a Christian social worker. There were other workshops but this issue was THE one. I have also joined Facebook, which allows you to establish a virtual community on the web. It is a phenomenal phenomenon

How are the two linked? Here's my hypothesis! Busyness and over-commitment leads to burnout and a situation where an entire youth camp signs up for a single workshop. Busyness and over-commitment precludes developing and experiencing real community: school activities and extra-murals, sport, a modern metropolitan lifestyle of living in different suburbs and having to drive everywhere fragments community.

I have a hunch that when I was a youth pastor the youth did not come solely to hear me preach on the weekend! Rather it was the chance to meet up with friends at church, friends with whom there has been the bond of camps and fun, friends growing together in community. Facebook allows a virtual community to continue during the week; a poor substitute for the real thing, but symptomatic of something deeper. In these virtual communities young people can be individuals, not dictated to by the shoulds, the oughts and the musts of daily life, parents, school and the Christian religion. This virtual community invites a moment's freedom or escape from pressing concerns, probably offers an emotional lifeline and a chance to have a voice. The pull can be strong. The risks can be high? virtual worlds are an extension of the real world and realities are so easily mixed?

These two things – the oversubscribed burnout workshop and a lack of genuine community – point to the reality of busy and pressurized youth. Call me a pessimist, but we are bound to see the fall-out from this lifestyle. The mid-life crisis will be pre-empted by a ¼-life crisis! But this message applies to adults too. As church leaders we need to take up the challenge to help our Christian community be one that can find spiritual rest in the midst of a rest-less society.

I like Eugene Peterson's phrasing of Matthew 11:28-30 (The Message) where Jesus says: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Are we learning the unforced rhythms of God's grace? Are we living it out as church leaders and leading people into it? I can't help thinking that I am instead chasing the horizon along with many others I know, albeit a horizon with ministry and mission goals. A poem by Stephen Crane goes thus:

"I saw a man pursuing the horizon;

Round and round they sped

I was disturbed at this;

I accosted the man.

"It is futile," I said,

"You can never - ?

"You lie," he cried.

And ran on.

And run on we seem to do. I had a mother slam down the phone on my wife when she told the church member that it was my day off and I would not give her details of catering for a youth event at our church. "Some of us never get a day off?", was her parting angry comment.

Some of us never get a day off? One of the hardest things for me to defend and justify working in the church seems to be a day of rest, which variably goes by the name of a "day off" or "retreat day". The standard retort is that normal working people do not get time to rest. Crazy thing is, that a sign of a godless society is a lack of respect for Sabbath rest.

Is it not ironic to find that same attitude so prevalent in the church? By denying our need to rest or by denying others their need to rest through, for example, the work conditions we impose, we deny the design and will of our Creator, who has made it known in Scripture that it is a good thing for us to seek regular rest spites. Not only are these rest spites good for us physically, mentally and emotionally, but true rest re-orientates us towards God.

One of the major witnesses of the Jews to the rest-less Roman and Greek society around them was their observance of the Sabbath in the midst of the relentless, unending demands of trade and the gods of commerce. To rest was to momentarily sacrifice your position in trading for gain and entrust yourself to the goodness of God. So it is with rest today.

Today that pressure to work may be even greater. Thanks to providers of electricity, internet, cell (mobile) phones, etc we can be at work 24 hours, 7 days a week. The setting sun does not mark the end of work. Preaching about Godly rest and its importance is absent from many churches. Protestantism is known for its work ethic. Yet Christianity is not known for its rest ethic: a God centred rest ? source of life, peace, healing and right perspective on work. (It's part of our theology but not of our practice.) Indeed resting from church work, even momentarily, may be to risk sacrificing mission and ministry gains?

Is it any surprise then that we reap the fruit of busyness? Burnt out church leaders. Burnt out youth pastors and young people. Neglect of spouses and children, even in Christian families. An impoverished sense of church community.

Maybe it's time for Time out. Time together. Time to rest. Time to learn the unforced rhythms of God's grace and to live lightly. Time to entrust ourselves to the goodness of God. Time to recognize that rest stands as a beacon of truth in a rest-less society about a God who calls us to rest in Him. Time to invite people to find rest for their restless souls in Jesus, who says "Come to me all you who are weary and I will give your rest."

Where God is present there is always an invitation to God-ordained rest. And at the end of time, Eternal Rest.

**Website Link:**

<http://petersprogress.wordpress.com/>