

WORK HOURS & MINISTRY

Can we say anything about expected working hours for a minister of the gospel?

This has become an issue of concern in recent times because of a heightened incidence of burnout among ministers. Burnout is a somewhat varied experience and so are its causes, and treatment. At a very basic level, burnout is simply a feeling of exhaustion. A holiday helps. But there is a more serious kind of 'burnout' that has far longer lasting consequences. It tends to be this form of burnout that is the driver in most discussions around a pastor's work hours. The first form comes and goes. The second can be hard to come back from, and it's this form that leads some to the very radical suggestions that a pastor ought work no more than 40 hours a week.

As serious as this experience is, and as much as we need to do all we can to minimise it, it can complicate any discussion around work hours. Because as far as we can tell, this more serious form of Burnout is related to a range of internal factors rather than simply external. That is to say, it isn't simply long work hours that causes this kind of burnout. And so it isn't solved simply by making broad reaching rules around shorter hours. Much more attention needs to be paid to personal issues. Hours will likely trigger burnout, but only if there are other factors operating. So, it complicates a broader discussion around hours if we start with this issue and work backwards to rules on hours. Far better, to consider some broader principles (biblically and practically) around hours and then work backwards to the needs of some given their particular personal circumstances.

Work hours and the Bible

The immediate impression given by much of the language of the NT is that the pastor's task is a challenging one, and is properly described as 'hard work'.

Paul modelled this. His words to the Ephesian elders - "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of **hard work** we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' ""(Acts 20:35). To the Corinthians, "We **work hard** with our own hands." (1 Cor 4:12); "in beatings, imprisonments and riots; **in hard work**, sleepless nights and hunger;" (2 Cor 6:5); "Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have **worked much harder**, been in prison more frequently, ..." (2 Cor 11:23). To the Thessalonians - "Surely you remember, brothers, our **toil** and hardship; we **worked night and day** in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you." (1 Thess 2:9).

He honoured Epaphras for this style of ministry – “I vouch for him that he is **working hard for you** and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.” (Col 4:13).

He expected this to be the pattern for all pastors – “Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to **acknowledge those who work hard among you**, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you.” (1 Thess 5:12).

When Paul teaches Timothy about the life of the pastoral ministry he uses three illustrations that speak to the need to be controlled (the soldier), focused (Athlete) and hard working (Farmer) – (2 Tim 2). He describes his ministry as “being poured out like a drink offering” (2 Tim 4:6).

Add to this the many warnings throughout the book of Proverbs that condemn the lazy and commend the hard worker (....). Hard work is the pattern for the pastor.

Of course, the challenge with this is the fact that ‘hard work’ and ‘laziness’ are relative terms.

If you’ve been raised by an Asian tiger mum (bless her) then any mention of a life of hard work will immediately strike you as nothing less than a 70 hour week. But if you’ve been raised as an indulged teenager always able to pursue leisure and sport then anything over 40 hours a week will seem excessive, and perhaps even offensive to a God honouring lifestyle, who after all gave us all good things to enjoy (1 Tim 4).

This highlights one of the key complexities in determining a pastor’s hours – our cultural and family backgrounds. Our perception of effort and sacrifice is relative to our personal history and cultural setting.

In a sense, what is needed is a baseline. What is a ‘normal working week’ from which the categories of hard work and laziness can take their measure?

There is no simple biblical command that speaks to the number of hours a person ought to work. However, a number of passages give some direction.

Within the context of work being a good gift from God (Gen 2:15), though now lived in a context where it is hard and painful (Gen 3:17, 19), we are given a command about the weekly work pattern. It is the very well known six days of work, one day of rest (Ex 20:9-10). This sets an important pattern, not only of work, but also of rest. We weren’t made for work. We were made for rest, where rest is not only rest from our hard work, but also a deeper experience of relationship with God through the merits of Christ (Heb 4). God has given good things for us to enjoy. Some workers need to hear this very loudly, and some pastors especially. It is right to enjoy the many good things of creation. Stop work, and go and enjoy! Give thanks. Deepen your walk with him and your rest in him. Fill up your spiritual tanks and rest.

But we were also made to work. And the pattern is a six-day working week. Now of course, this need not mean six days of employed, paid work, outside the home. It can certainly also include the work required in household and family chores. But it is a striking word in our cultural context. If there was ever a time in history where working like this is frowned upon it is our day and age. Any suggestion of a six-day working week is met with shock and horror. It feels like introducing some form of slavery again. The fact is, as a culture, we have embraced the life of leisure – except for a driven few. This is understandable since we have removed any sense of a life beyond this one. Why spend this life working when it is the only life we might ever live? Much better to go out and eat, drink, and merry, for tomorrow we die. ‘Flourishing’ is now the great aim, even in Christian circles. Your best life now.

The Bible is counter cultural, even more so when its assumptions about a daily routine are considered. Two passages both assume a dawn to dusk pattern of work (Psalm 104 and Matt 20). This is a long way from a law such as the fourth commandment. But it gives an insight into the culture of the Jewish world. And so gives some frame of reference to any teaching about laziness and hard work. Again, both these passages could lend themselves to a working day that included household chores as well as paid employment. And both make sense of a world where there was no electric light bulb. You worked when it was light, for as long as it was light. And you did this six days a week. One passage that might challenge even this view however is Proverbs 31. There, the great one is a woman who got up “while it is still dark...and her lamp doesn’t go out at night”. What a woman.

Again, this is heard differently depending on your culture and family history. Some super responsible people find themselves driven by these patterns to somehow compete and prove themselves. Beware! Burnout is looming. But, it is important to notice the biblical culture that is so very different from our own.

Certainly the Jew had various festivals that broke this pattern and so provided a rich balance of work and rest. And their working life had parts that made such days possible. There was family, and connection, and good down time without electronic devices always intruding (they seem restful to us, but actually hurt relaxation). But these kinds of days were also possible because humans learn to cope with hard work and develop resilience.

The impression therefore given is a working week that is around 10 hour days, six days a week.

As noted, this for many today is a horrifying pattern of life. We have inherited a set of values from our baby boomer parents, most of whom retired early and set out to maximised leisure (caravan anyone?). It is a fact of recent years that most employers struggle with younger employees who carry with them a sense of entitlement and expectations of ready advancement and disdain for hard work.

It is perhaps into this climate we need to reclaim not just the teaching on the importance of rest, but the value the Bible puts on work as a good thing, given by our good God, who himself is working to this very day (John 5).

We are to be workers; and resters! Work hard; work unto the lord. And rest well. Our ability to do both well is a testimony to our world. But both in right measure. Different people need to pay attention to different sides of this teaching.

Lazy workers, people shaped by our culture of ease, don't adorn the gospel. And if there are some who don't need to work more than 40 hours a week because of high paying jobs or low family costs, we ought to encourage them to consider picking up a serious number of hours of volunteer work a week as a service to church or community. We are right to push back against the relaxed lifestyle of so many.

What about the hours of work for a pastor? How many hours a week? Is it 10 hours a day, 6 days a week?

Here is where a game of 'argument tennis' starts. It is typical to find people arguing back and forward making various points that then have counter points, and so on.

So for example.

In favour of a longer working week is the fact that many members of our congregation are working longer hours. It is easy to find estimates of average working weeks. Business executives regularly work 60 plus hours, according to Forbes. Business owners regularly work a 50 hour week, according to the Aust bureau of statistics. Managers were up at 47 hours in 1996, though the average has fallen in recent years. Founders of new businesses typically work 50 hours plus and state that "more success often equals longer hours...". A quarter of all construction workers put in more than 50 hours per week. And many commuters easily rack up 50 hours plus away from home because of daily commutes of 2 hours. Mothers need to be mentioned. Their work is real and constant; seven days a week. And we expect each of these people to then come to church every week, participate in a mid-week home group, and serve in a ministry. This typically adds another 10 hours a week to their committed time away from home. So shouldn't a pastor work at least as hard as many people in their church?

But! From the other side, many point out that the executive is often driven by unhealthy motivations and most workers putting in long hours are rewarded with a pay package that motivates their sacrifice. And then many note that extreme long hours takes their toll on family life. Certainly. And most hard working executives are highly skill and capable people, uniquely suited to the demands (but why should we employ pastors who are any less able?). And the commuter has a very different experience across his 40 hours work, plus 10 hours commute. Many note that the experience of the mother's working week is varied and includes lower demanding roles that aren't equally as taxing (possibly!).

And in response to the fact that 'ministry hours' are on top of working hours, it is noted that these hours are for many workers akin to a hobby. Surely it can't therefore be right to formulate a working week for a pastor as 40 hours plus 15 to replicate the demands of the normal congregation member who does a 40 hour a week job plus 15 hours church ministry.

But conversely, the pastor's life has considerable variety as well. This shifts the pattern of the load. There is reading time, socialising, listening to pastoral issues, attending church along with everyone else, etc. And there is greater flexibility to his working week such that he is often able to fit in family life in a way many workers only dream of. And they can often find time during the day to get some recreation.

But then comes a contrary opinion to this. The pastor works in a people pressured environment. It is often thankless, and full of conflict. There is the performance pressure of the relentless sermon preparation and delivery (this is real and costly to the emotional life of most pastors). There are financial pressures (personal and church). The expectations of the congregation members which is high, the grief and stress of constant hurt and disappointment. Working with volunteers who have very high expectations and very low commitment levels. And a hostile culture that despises the pastoral role. So some suggest that trying to work for 60 hours a week in this environment is deadly.

And further to this is the claim that some make that research suggests that anything over a 40 hour working week is unproductive. There are many popular articles and books extolling a shorter working week as a far more productive strategy.

And so on, back and forward.

What is true in all of this is that it is very, very difficult to properly evaluate equivalence in the working life of different people. It is almost impossible to compare jobs. And there are different ways to do the pastoral ministry. Some Ministers do their jobs in such a relaxed way that they could 'work' 70 hours a week and it would still leave them relaxed and at ease. Others push themselves so hard, in a very pressured and hostile environment, that 45 hours feels a far greater burden than the CEO doing 70 hours. Working life is very hard to quantify exactly and compare across professions, and even within the pastoral office. Although, it is the case that many independent working measures regularly place pastoral ministry at or near the top of the 'most difficult job' list. And the level of 'burnout' among pastors is among the highest of professions.

Where to land in it all?

First thing to say is that the task of the pastor is to be internally driven by a heart captured by the love of Christ, and the great needs of our world for the gospel, so that whatever they do it is done willingly and not because of any external demands or rules. The pastor

properly must be eager to serve. Guilt, fear, personal needs, internal baggage that creates an unhealthy drive will kill a pastoral ministry. A pastor must want to be a pastor and bear the burden of ministry. He must desire to 'work hard' for those people under his care, out of love for God and their well-being. For some, 'working hard' will look longer than others. But at the very least, there is something dreadfully wrong with a pastor who has chosen the role as a lifestyle choice and who stays in it concerned to ensure he maintains a balanced lifestyle so life can be as full and rich as possible. This is very far from not only the pattern of biblical ministry, but also from the pattern of Christian living in these last days.

Is it possible to say more than this? And offer at least a starting point for hours worked?

At the very least I think it is possible to rule out the 40 hour a week option for pastors (unless there are health issues (personally or in the family). This truly fails the 'hard work' test given the above biblical teaching.

And the fact is, although it is difficult to compare jobs, most of our congregation are working much harder than a simple 40 hour week. Yes, it is true that the ministry time they put in on top of their working week is often a form of refreshment; but it is still the case that they carry a far greater load than a simple 40 hour week. And a great number do more than 45 hours a week at work. And the fact is the pastoral work has great variety in it. What things ought to be included as work in a working week? Bible reading each day? Prayer time? Dinner with friends who are also congregation members? Attendance at church? If all of these things were included in a 40 hour working week, the remaining time would give little space to actually progress the work forward. Pastors would be carrying a far lower load than almost anyone in church, and almost certainly working a lighter load than their wives who carry not only a load as a mother, but often carry the burden of household chores, and then add their own pastoral ministry on top. It is hard to get past the fact that a 40 hour week would undermine any real leadership a pastor has among people who get up at 7am every morning to get on a train and only get home again at 6pm at night.

And a 40 hour week makes no sense given the times we find ourselves in. Time is short. Christ will return. People will die. How can we be thinking balance, and health when there are so many lives to save? This is surely the driver for the models we see in scripture.

What about efficiencies in a working week? A number of studies reveal that productivity falls with increased working hours. But there is some complexity here. Some studies indicate that for more experienced workers, the trend is not as great, and may even reverse. And this from 'The Institute of Employment Studies' in the UK - "There were considerable theoretical and methodological difficulties in measuring the impact of long hours working on organisational performance. Overall, however, on the basis of the evidence, it was not possible to establish conclusively whether long hours working had

beneficial, detrimental or neutral overall effects.”¹ And there is the simple fact that if pastoral staff all cut back to 40 hour weeks, very many functions, activities, people care work and structures of church life would simply fall to the ground. So at least in church life, more hours does equal more people cared for, more things done, more ministry ‘productivity’.

There is wisdom of course in shaping a working week to ensure those activities most vulnerable to productivity drain are performed when a person is most energised (reading, sermon prep?). And activities least impacted by lower energy levels are positioned elsewhere (most people work?).

But, of course, doing too much people work can then feedback to the other activities if insufficient time is given to rest. It is therefore important for the pastor to have a day off, to properly reflect the theology of Sabbath, the theology that says we were made to rest in him and trust him as he ultimately does the work. There must be weekly and daily patterns of rest. The electric light bulb can create an inordinate pressure in the spiritually driven to over-work and so destroy the Lord’s servant and ruin his ability to sustain himself for the long haul (so too does the computer and internet. We are wired to the world every waking hour. Turn these things off!). There was something wonderful about the realities of dawn and dusk and the lack of electricity. It was hard to keep working. And when you stopped, you really stopped.

But with this proper regard to rest, he must give himself to work.

If I were forced to pitch for a ball park pattern I would suggest 50 hours a week is a good starting place for most young leaders.² How have I arrived at this number? It is 60 hours minus 10 which allows for the impact of our modern internet age which is so connected through media; and which recognises the unique pressures of a pastor; and the importance of investing in home and family life. But it is not minus more than 10, because there is just so much to do. And our congregation members need to be led by men who model hard work.³

¹ <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/report-summaries/report-summary-working-long-hours-review-evidence-volume-1—main-report>

“...there was no conclusive evidence that long hours working led to lower levels of overall work or organisational performance. Moreover, if it did, it was difficult to establish the working time duration thresholds at which any such effects set in, especially as this was likely to vary significantly according to individual characteristics.”

² Four days of 8am to 5pm (with a lunch break), a half day, an 8 hour Sunday (two church services, prep, plus hospitality over lunch), plus two or three nights out. I work this out as just shy of 50 hours. Include a full day and a half off each week and that’s is a sustainable week.

³ This assumes he is healthy and his wife and family are healthy, is not the primary care giver to his children, isn’t bi-vocational, etc.

Now, as health and family allow, there is the possibility of stretching to longer working hours (many leaders have worked at higher levels for many years effectively). But as a leader stretches to longer hours, he or she must also pay attention to their health and the health of their families. There is no merit in burning out (talking here of the psychological burnout). Jesus didn't hold himself back, but gave himself up for us all. So, be ready to stretch, but stretch with a mind of wisdom. And be open to the possibility that at times there needs to be room to reduce hours as well. Jesus likewise aimed to take times out from the crowds to get rest (....). And the fact is, at times, family, and health require us to cut back. Sometimes it is necessary to cut back to pay attention to personal issues that are intruding on the leaders ability to cope with a pressured environment. Take time out to get counselling if there are symptoms of depression, bitterness or lethargy. Pay attention to these warning signs. Get some exercise, and get good rest. Take time out to enjoy the good things God has given us. And also work hard when you work.

There needs to be room for some flex. We are to do what we do willingly, and not out of guilt, burden, or insecurity. We are to set an example to the people of God; sorrowful perhaps at time, yet always rejoicing.

And all of this needs to be done within the context of a proper awareness of the power of culture and family history. If a leader has been raised in a culture of ease and comfort, they will not know what hard work is really like (And it is possible their wife will be out of the same mould). They will have expectations about a working life that will destroy their ability to reach their potential. For someone like this, 45 hour weeks will feel like a load too great to bear. But this is largely only a training and growth thing. With practice and application it is possible to sustain longer hours. Almost every new worker knows this truth. Our problem as pastors is that we have the kind of job that allows us to most easily hide laziness. No one checks. No one watches. We only need to turn up to a few set events. And as long we keep these wheels turning we can hide our lack of effort.

Our task is a profoundly important one. We don't do what we do as a lifestyle choice. We do it out of a desire to truly make a difference for Christ. The love of Christ compels us. Woe is me if I don't preach the gospel.

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