

Reflections on The Simplification of Life

READINGS

A biblical lifestyle cannot have wealth as a goal. The biblical authors and Jesus for the most part distrust wealth. It is possessed by the powerful of this age who oppress the poor. It is gathered at the expense of the poor (and thus is violent and oppressive even if the means of accumulating wealth are "legal"). It is maintained at the expense of charity, which calls one to share with the poor. And wealth is highly seductive, luring its possessors into compromise with this age in order to retain (or increase) it. At best wealth is questionable, and at worst it both damning and damned, since it connects one to the world system which stands under God's judgment.

The biblical authors therefore call on wealthier Christians to share their goods with the less fortunate, to identify with the cry of the poor for justice, and even to totally divest themselves of their surplus. These are the possible implications of rejecting wealth as a goal. The call is, then, for a simple lifestyle in which needs are met, but in which one lives close enough to the edge of one's resources to have to trust in God to meet his or her needs. This is the ideal of many biblical authors from Proverbs to Paul, with Jesus being especially strong in this regard (cf. Proverbs 30:7-9).



Mother and Child, by William Taylor Walnut carving. University of the District of Columbia.

Having drawn these conclusions, we must remind ourselves of two further facts. The Christian is not called to live outside of or withdrawn from the world, but right in the middle of it. Yet his or her lifestyle is to stand in stark contrast to the world. Lifestyle, then, is a major part of the witness of the Christian: it demonstrates the transforming power of Christ. But to sustain such a contrasting lifestyle, the Christian needs the support of Christian community. The discipline and love of other Christians has practical effect at this very point.

Furthermore, we must always remind ourselves that biblical living is not law, but grace, not a new shackle, but true freedom from bondage to materialism. This life is a creation of the Spirit. Without this dynamic, it is unrealistic—even idiotic—to attempt this way of living: but with it, this lifestyle becomes possible.

Then one can express the new life of God, of freedom in an age of bondage.

—Peter H. Davids, in “God and Mammon,” Part II,
Sojourners, March 1978, p. 29¹

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Perhaps we need to separate between two kinds of giving. In one kind, to act responsibly, we need to make sure the money is used for the purpose for which we gave it. If we give to famine relief we want to know it gets to the people and isn't pocketed by a government official.

There are times when giving with certain specifications is a very creative thing. And there are times when giving isn't appropriate at all.

But there's another kind of giving, giving in which we trust others in the use of the money. We don't say, “Play it my way or I'm going to take my bat and ball and go home.”

I think one of the two or three absolutely central issues in what it means to be human is the issue of control. It is laid out in Genesis. In the Garden of Eden God and Adam and Eve

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are dealing with who is in control. God says, "I am in control," and Adam and Eve say, "We don't like the set up!"

Control . . . power . . . security . . . God and Mammon . . . personal freedom . . . faith . . . giving and receiving—such basic life issues! And at the core of each of them are questions about money. We are products of a money culture. It is where we live, and its vitality is something we have to face as we work through the questions of our own living.

Jesus represents a life of conventional values turned upside down. One of these values, in our time, can be our understanding of giving—that giving is something one does for oneself. This kind of giving is not duty or grim burden; it is not paternalistic or manipulative. It is the only giving in which giver and receiver can be equal. This kind of giving is sharing and celebration.

—John Levering in, "Breaking the Power of Money",
Faith/at/Work, August 1975, p. 9¹

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Fear of want and lack of trust
twin stimulators of insecurity
provide fertile soil for the worry seed
to burst forth with evil intent
causing thoughts tinged with anxiety
desires greater than needs
ambitions that override better judgment
until preoccupation with the hunger for things
saps the flow of spiritual energy
and the single-purposed heart
living a simple uncluttered life
becomes dead to God

Lois Shank Hertzler²

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To Miss March, London, February 7, 1776

I have found some of the uneducated poor who have exquisite taste and sentiment; and many, very many of the rich who have scarcely any at all. But I do not speak of this: I want you to converse more, abundantly more, with the poorest of the people, who, if they have not taste, have souls, which you may forward in their way to heaven. And they have (many of them) faith, and the love of God, in a larger measure than any persons I know. Creep in among these, in spite of dirt and a hundred disgusting circumstances; and thus put off the gentlewoman. Do not confine your conversation to genteel and elegant people. I should like this as well as you do: but I cannot discover a precedent for it in the life of our Lord, or any of his apostles. My dear friend, let you and I walk as he walked. . .

Never let your expenses exceed your income. To servants I would give full as much as others give for the same service; and not more. It is impossible to lay down any general rules as to "saving all we can," and "giving all we can." In this, it seems, we must needs be directed, from time to time, by the unction of the Holy One. Evil spirits have undoubtedly abundance of work to do in an evil world; frequently in concurrence with wicked men, and frequently without them.

—John Wesley

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A group of devout Christians once lived in a small village at the foot of a mountain. A winding, slippery road with hairpin curves and steep precipices without guard rails wound its way up one side of the mountain and down the other. There were frequent fatal accidents. Deeply saddened by the injured people who were pulled from the wrecked cars, the Christians in the village's three churches decided to act. They pooled their resources and purchased an ambulance so that they could rush the injured to the hospital in the next town. Week after week church volunteers gave faithfully, even sacrificially, of their time to operate the ambulance twenty-four hours a day.

They saved many lives although some victims remained crippled for life.

Then one day a visitor came to town. Puzzled, he asked why they did not close the road over the mountain and build a tunnel instead. Startled at first, the ambulance volunteers quickly pointed out that this approach (although technically quite possible) was not realistic or advisable. After all, the narrow mountain road had been there for a long time. Besides, the mayor would bitterly oppose the idea. (He owned a large restaurant and service station halfway up the mountain.)

The visitor was shocked that the mayor's economic interests mattered more to these Christians than the many human casualties. Somewhat hesitantly, he suggested that perhaps the churches ought to speak to the mayor. After all, he was an elder in the oldest church in town. Perhaps they should even elect a different mayor if he proved stubborn and unconcerned. Now the Christians were shocked. With rising indignation and righteous conviction they informed the young radical that the church dare not become involved in politics. The church is called to preach the gospel and give a cup of cold water. Its mission is not to dabble in worldly things like social and political structures.

Perplexed and bitter, the visitor left. As he wandered out of the village, one question churned round and round in his muddled mind. Is it really more spiritual, he wondered, to operate the ambulances which pick up the bloody victims of destructive social structures than to try to change the structures themselves?

—Ronald J. Sider, in
Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, pp. 203-204¹

QUESTIONS

1. How do you account for the growing popularity of simplified lifestyles? In what ways is this related to the "burn out" reported by so many hard-driving business executives?

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2. Many persons find it difficult to simplify their lifestyle because they have allowed their standard of living to rise with their income. What steps can be taken to reverse this process? What factors, such as peer pressure, make this reversal difficult?

3. What specific steps could you take at this point in your life to simplify your lifestyle? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of moving in this direction?

4. In what ways can the Christian community be supportive of those trying to develop a simplified lifestyle? Why do most persons find this support essential?

5. How does the problem of family inheritance relate to the simplification of life? Does it mean that we should leave less of our estate to our children? Explain your answer.

MEDITATION

*"Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you."
(1 Peter 5:7)*

Turning from the world's cares and entering my inner chamber of prayer, I release the anxieties that trouble my heart invite Christ the Lord to enter picture his coming and know his peace.

Dear Lord, I truly want you to be at the center of my personal world, but sometimes I feel tangled in the traffic of daily life. So many things call for attention. Help me to simplify life by letting go of superfluous things, and giving myself more fully to what really matters. If I have too many commitments, or possessions, or tasks, guide me as I learn what to change. If I am too absorbed in myself, direct me as I reach out. If I have made gods of people or things, help me to restructure my life. Quiet the many voices within and speak to my deep mind, living Lord. Fill it with hope and joy and peace.

Quiet



1965

SADAO WATANABE

Pentecost, by Sadao Watanabe. Stencil print, 1965. Tokyo.