

## **Simplicity**

### **Living Life to the Full**

In the first **Cred Paper** we looked at the subject of globalisation and the part that it is playing in the destruction of the environment and, particularly, in increasing human poverty.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the paper we began to look at how we can respond to the situation that we find our world to be in. All of us have a responsibility to be alert to what is going on in our world; not to hide in the security and convenience of our own horizons, but to reach out beyond ourselves and get involved in the struggles that are going on around us.

This paper offers up one response to the problems of global poverty and environmental destruction. I want to be quick to say that simplicity is *not* the only answer and this paper will by no means provide all the solutions. However, it is a key response and one that challenges much of what lies at the root of globalisation.

Before we go any further, though, we need perhaps to clear away some debris because it would not be surprising if your toes curled when you heard the word ‘simplicity’! Indeed there is a hesitation in even using the word in the title because of connotations that it bears. Does the word mean to you woolly jumpers and mung-bean stew? Do you think of living in poverty somewhere in a draughty hut? I would not blame you if you do, but I want to look at a way of simplicity that is actually about something far more exciting...

Henry Thoreau, one of the key writers on this issue, said, “a person is rich in proportion to the things they can leave alone”. Simplicity is not about scarcity and misery, but about discovering what it really means to be rich. It is about having true life in abundance: “life to the full”, as Jesus said (John 10:10). But what is true life? What does it mean to be really rich? Much of this paper will look at some of the practicalities of simplicity, but, if we are going to practice those things effectively, it is essential that we set a Christian framework.

#### **A Christian framework for simplicity**

Christians find an understanding of these things in their understanding of God and, on this basis, it is instantly apparent that true life is found in relationships. The most foundational aspect of God is that of the Trinity. The Godhead is composed of continually flowing relationships between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit so that each finds its identity through the other: God’s personhood as ‘Father’ only comes into being in relation to God as ‘Son’. Whilst they each have separate identities, yet there is absolute unity and harmony between them. The Father is the supreme author of all, yet there is equality between them and order in their separate roles as, through them, they each exist to serve and glorify the other.<sup>2</sup>

It is this Trinitarian understanding that provides the foundation for what it means for humanity to be made “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:28). Being made in God’s image finds its meaning in the personhood that is in God. In this understanding, personhood does not consist in being distinct and separate before relating together. Rather, personhood arises precisely through being together in relationship. It is this understanding of personhood that we image in our humanity. Instead of the static individuality of the Western worldview, the Genesis account leads to a view of humanity as social beings who only become genuinely human through relationship. These relationships are threefold.

*Firstly, as human beings we relate to God, our Creator.* We have been created in order to be “for the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:12), an expression of the unceasing love that exists between the persons of the Godhead. The picture of the Lord God walking in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8) shows the perfect harmony that should have existed between God and humanity, but which was broken by the Fall. Through the sacrifice of Jesus - the second Adam and true image of God (Col. 1:15) - this picture is restored again in the final chapters of Revelation. Here we are told that “the dwelling of God is with people, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be

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<sup>1</sup> R. Valerio, “Globalisation and Poverty”, **Cred Papers**, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> M. Goldsmith, *Jesus and His Relationships*, 8 – 23.

their God” (Rev. 21:3). Thus our relationship with God is made up of past, present and future: we *have* been created by *God*, we *are* being sustained by *God* and we *will* be perfected by *God*.<sup>3</sup>

Through a relationship with Jesus, the Son - in his life, death and resurrection – we do not just have our image of God restored, we become children of God ourselves. The Eastern Orthodox Church has much to teach us in this regard. They, more clearly than Western theology, have given expression to the participation of believers in the divine, eternal life of the Trinity. Writing on the subject of prayer, the Society of St. John the Evangelist expresses it thus:

a ceaseless interchange of mutual love unites the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our prayer is not merely communion with God, it is coming to know God by participation in this divine life. In prayer we experience what it is to be made ‘participants of the divine nature’; we are caught up in the communion of the divine persons as they flow to one another in self-giving love and reciprocal joy.<sup>4</sup>

*The second area of our relationships is with one another.* Whilst in the Genesis creation narrative the marital relationship may be primary, it is not exclusively so. Cain’s question to God – “am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9) carries a clear affirmative with it and the Noachic covenant of Genesis 9 extends this still further. Because we have all been made in the image of God, we are each accountable for the life of our fellow humans. Basic to that accountability, though, is the recognition that we find our true selves not as autonomous individuals but through our relationships with one another. As Gunton says, “who we are is made known to us through the relationships in which we stand”.<sup>5</sup>

This view of our identity stands in direct contrast with that given to us by modern society. All around us we are told that we find our true selves in what we consume: the car we drive, the house we live in, the clothes we wear etc. <sup>6</sup> Instead, we look again to the Trinity to see the model for our relationships. Whilst we each maintain our uniqueness yet we should live in unity together, preferring the other and living lives of service.

*Thirdly, as human beings we relate to the rest of creation; the world around us.*<sup>7</sup> A false understanding of the word ‘dominion’ in Gen. 1:26, Enlightenment values that viewed the environment as a ‘resource for man’ and eschatological beliefs that see the destruction of this world as part of God’s end-time plans have all contributed to us missing this vital element of our identity. The reality is that we are a part of creation. Humanity may have been given a special role within creation; that of being made in the image of God, but it is an inescapable fact that we are part of the same eco-systems and structures that are formed with the rest of creation. This is readily apparent in the creation narrative of Gen. 1: 1 – 2:3 in which, contrary to popular thought, humanity is not the pinnacle of creation (although clearly a special part of it): that honour lies on the seventh day with the establishment of the Sabbath rest.

Nature, represented by the Garden of Eden, was then the first place where humanity met with God<sup>8</sup> and this is something that surely resonates loudly with us today. The people of Israel certainly recognised that as they filled their temple with “reminders of the natural world”<sup>9</sup> (eg. Ex. 25: 31-33) and the Psalms are full of the praises of creation (Ps. 104 being the most obvious example). Not only are they simply

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<sup>3</sup> C. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 44 – 46.

<sup>4</sup> The Society of St. John the Evangelist, *Living in Hope*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 72.

<sup>6</sup> This is often described as *tesco ergo sum* as opposed to Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*.

<sup>7</sup> Essentially, our relationships are twofold: vertically, with God and horizontally, with the created order, including both humanity and the environment. However, I have chosen to separate our relationships with one another and our relationships with the rest of creation in order to emphasise the importance of the latter.

<sup>8</sup> L. Osborn, *Guardians of Creation*, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Osborn, *Guardians*, 92.

reminders, however. Gunton makes the point that “the enabling of creation’s praise of the creator becomes a central part of the human offering of thanks to Gods creating and redeeming love”.<sup>10</sup>

Past, present and future tense come into play here too for the non-human creation, as with the human, in God’s acts of creating, sustaining and perfecting. The future perfection is particularly important to consider since this has so often been, at best, ignored and, at worst, used as an excuse for environmental degradation. Rom. 8: 18-25 and Col. 1:15 – 20 demonstrate that Jesus is Lord over *all* things and *all* things are involved in his future. A wonderful picture of this is given in Rev. 4 which shows all of creation praising God.

It is a sobering, but exciting, thought to consider that our relationship with the world around us is a part of what it means to be human.

So, relationships are at the heart of the life lived to the full envisaged by the way of simplicity. But, one further dynamic needs to be explored before we can look at some of the more practical aspects of simplicity and that is that a truly God-centred way of viewing our relationships with the rest of creation, rests on the firm basis of a giving away of oneself. Our role model for this is, of course, Jesus. Phil. 2: 6-8 describes how Jesus “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” and, in doing this, “he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross”.

Jesus’ death and resurrection are the means by which broken relationships are restored, on all the levels that we have spoken about. Jesus’ sacrifice reconciles God to humanity and humanity to one another (2 Cor. 5: 18 – 21; Eph. 2: 11 – 18). It also provides the way for the rest of creation to be brought into its right relationship with God. Speaking of Rom. 8: 18 – 25, Osborn says, “Paul sees Christ’s redemptive activity as effecting not just the reconciliation of humanity with God but, through that, also the consummation of the entire created order. The non-human part of creation is not merely a dispensable backdrop to the human drama of salvation history, but is itself able to share in the ‘glorious freedom’ which Paul envisages for the covenant community”.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst Jesus’ sacrifice is a once-for-all event, yet it still carries within it the principle as to how we should live our lives and conduct our relationships. When the disciples were squabbling amongst themselves, Jesus said to them, “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:26 – 28). Similarly, he told the disciples, “whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for a person to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?” (Lk. 9: 24-25).

Let me sum up where we have got to so far. Simplicity is about being truly rich. A biblical understanding of a rich life is that it is based on our relationships: with the God who made us; with the people around us and with the world in which we live. Simplicity, therefore, is about exploring how we can live our lives in such a way that we are able to invest in these relationships fully. Moreover, a Christ-centered approach to relationships tells us that we only find life by giving it away. For the majority of us reading this paper, simplicity may not be about scarcity, but it may well entail a giving up of things we value in order to find those things that are of eternal value.

### **Choices<sup>12</sup>**

The vast majority of the people living in the world today do not have a choice as to how they will live. For many of us living in the wealthier nations, however, our lives are dominated by the choices we have made. As we look at our lives, do we know how we have ended up living how we are living and why? What choices have we made that control our present lifestyle? Some of us may have chosen a new house or car without thinking through the resultant trade-off that would mean working longer hours to pay for

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<sup>10</sup> Gunton, Christ and Creation, 98.

<sup>11</sup> Osborn, Guardians, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Much of the following material in this paper has been expanded from J. Odgers and R. Valerio, Simplicity, Love and Justice (Alpha International: 2003, forthcoming).

them and seeing less of the people we love. Too often we find ourselves on the treadmill of life, paying the consequences for choices we hardly knew we were making, so bound up were they in cultural expectations.

Simple living is about stopping that treadmill and giving us the space to choose how we want to live our lives (and do not let us ever forget what a privilege that is). There are many voices around us that tell us that happiness is to be found in good clothes and nice jewelry; in a job that commands respect; in crashing out in front of the TV in order to recover; in having a busy diary. Simplicity asks us to sit and listen to those other whispers inside us that we seldom have the time to hear. It helps us discover the happiness that comes from not having an abundance of money and things, but from having the space for intimacy in our friendships, the space for ourselves and, primarily, the space for God.

Too often our days are spent thinking about the future: we drive the kids to school or drive to work while planning what we will do that day, on auto-pilot, hardly noticing anything or anybody we drive past. As we talk to a friend on the phone we are thinking what we will have for lunch and fail to hear what she is really saying. We shove a plastic container in the microwave and eat its contents whilst thinking about a later meeting and miss the pleasure of eating good, simple food.

Simple living is about being joyfully *aware* of what we do and why we do it. We can live in the present as well as the future; having the room to savour each moment of our lives. Above all, simple living is about getting rid of the clutter that is in our lives so that we can hear the voice of God more clearly and serve him more readily.

So, let us now look more specifically at some of the areas in which simplicity can take place.

### **1. Time**

From what has been said so far, it will come as no surprise to hear that we have the greatest need for simplicity in our time. Time is God's creation and his gift to us. He has given it to us to enjoy and to use for his service. We each have it in equal amounts and it is hence our responsibility how we choose to steward that time. Simple living allows time to be the most rewarding and beautiful possession that we have, helping us reach a place of wholeness and awareness both of ourselves and of God.

And yet, "I haven't got the time" is one of the most frequently heard complaints of our society. Listen to this description of our lives: "capitalism has brought a dramatically increased standard of living, but at the cost of a much more demanding worklife. We are eating more, but we are burning up those calories at work. We have colour televisions and compact disc players, but we need them to unwind after a stressful day at the office. We take vacations, but we work so hard throughout the year that they become indispensable to our sanity. The conventional wisdom that economic progress has given us more things as well as more leisure is difficult to sustain".<sup>13</sup>

As a result, many around us are suffering. Stress is now one of the biggest problems in our society, resulting in millions of pounds lost through days off work and medical bills. Much of this has come about because of increased pressure at work with many more demands being placed on us and an expectation of longer and longer hours.

Sleep is one of the casualties of this and many people are not able to get their required amount of hours sleep per night, thus leading to sleep deprivation problems. It is not uncommon for me to hear of friends lying awake in bed in the early hours, unable to sleep, because of work issues going round and round their heads.

Fundamentally, it is relationships that suffer. Families are placed under increasing amounts of strain as both partners go out to paid work in order to bring home enough money. An increase in shiftwork only exacerbates the problem. 'Latchkey kids' can be the result: children who have to let themselves in from school and look after themselves while their parent(s) work(s). Friendships and caring for one another also struggle under the weight of time-pressures. We simply do not have the time for one another. When we are not at work we want to relax and unwind: to cook a meal for our sick friend or visit a lonely neighbour requires more of us than we are able to give.

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<sup>13</sup> Juliet Schor, *Simpler Living*, 34,35.

What is clear is that the situation is only going to get worse. As Tom Sine says, “that means we will have less time for family and friends, less time to pray and study Scripture and less time to volunteer to address the mounting needs of the poor in our societies”.<sup>14</sup>

One of the greatest ironies of time is that it often seems to be directly disproportional to the amount of money we have. Whilst we are all given it in equal proportions, actually time is one of the greatest dividers between those who spend time to save money and those who spend money to save time: “the new materialism is to do with our attitude to time”.<sup>15</sup> Time has now become a status-symbol and we measure our worth by our busyness and believe ourselves to be indispensable to all that goes on around us.

Our use of time reflects the values of our lives and now is an opportunity to ask ourselves whether or not we are truly living out God’s values and, if not, what needs to change. Many of us need to make changes so that we have the time simply to be: to be with ourselves and to be with God. Time in this sense has been described as “opening space in our lives for a greater awareness of God”.<sup>16</sup>

For many, the primary way for this is through the practices of silence, solitude and contemplation. Let us touch the surface by looking at Gerald May’s three suggestions as to how we can begin to create space.<sup>17</sup>

Firstly he suggests looking for spaces that occur normally in our lives. That might mean a natural break after we have finished some work which could be expanded or maybe it is time in the shower or in the garden or just before we settle down to sleep. May suggests thinking over a typical day in our mind and asking oneself if there are moments which we immediately and automatically fill by turning on the TV or making ourselves a drink. It may be that, instead, we could extend those moments just a while longer and make them more ‘intentional’: moments to stop and be still.

Secondly, we should try to find the more regular set-aside spaces during the day that are “simply and solely dedicated to just being”. To begin with, these may just be a few minutes. However long they are, they are an opportunity to take some space and establish ourselves with Jesus at the centre. Evening times can be a chance to reflect on what the day has held.

Finally, May recommends building longer spaces of authentic retreat into our lives. These may actually involve going away for a retreat or taking a day of quiet. It is worth finding out whether we find space more easily with other people or alone and this can help us decide if we should spend these times by ourselves or maybe join with another group of people who have a similar desire.

Our aim is to bring our use of time under control so that it serves our Kingdom values rather than those of the world; living intentionally in each moment of time. Henri Nouwen’s description of this is beautiful. He talks of a life, “in which time slowly loses its opaqueness and becomes transparent. This is often a very difficult and slow process, but full of re-creating power. To start seeing that the many events of our day, week or year are not in the way of our search for a full life, but the way to it, is a real experience of conversion. If we discover that writing letters, ... visiting people and cooking food are not a series of random events which prevent us from realising our deepest self, but contain in themselves the transforming power we are looking for, then we are beginning to move from time lived as *chronos* to time lived as *kairos*”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Sine, Mustard Seed Vs. McWorld, 128.

<sup>15</sup> R. McCloughry, “Community Ethics”, in New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology, IVP, 1995, 110.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Schut (ed.), Simpler Living, 253.

<sup>17</sup>Schut, Simpler Living, 50,51. If you want to take this a step further, I recommend you reading R. Foster, Prayer: Finding the heart’s true home.

<sup>18</sup> Henri Nouwen, “Contemplation and Ministry”, in Simpler Living, 54.

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Think back over the last week and jot down everything you did and how long for.

*Consider:*

- How much of the decisions about where to spend your time came out of the expectations of modern culture and how much came out of the impulses of your faith?<sup>19</sup>
- What, if any, free or inexpensive activities do you regularly do? Why or why not?
- Do you feel guilty if you are not as busy as those around you?
- Are you happy with your use of time? If not, what might be some realistic ways in which you could use your time better?

*Take action:*

- Commit to pray for fifteen minutes a day. Set aside a specific time, eg. walking to the tube or in the shower. You don't have to be on your knees to pray effectively! Or, similarly, commit to a period of silence each day.
  - Walk or cycle, rather than drive, as much as possible. Use the time deliberately to be aware of what and who is around you.
  - If you have a skill (eg. sewing, administration, accountancy, medical, artistic, teaching) find a way to use it and give it away for free.
  - Be creative in your present-giving. Give someone the gift of yourself/your time/your friendship and agree to spend regular time cooking them a meal/doing their cleaning/going out together... whatever you know will be appreciated.
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## 2. Money and Possessions

A second area in which simplicity can take place is in our attitude towards, and use of, money and possessions. This is such an important area since so much of our culture and society revolves around the desire to accumulate increasing amounts of both. As we saw in "Globalisation and Poverty", we live in a consumer-based society. Since this is such a key feature of our society and a major component of what simplicity aims to stand against, let us take some time to look at our culture of consumerism.

### *Consumerism*

A friend of mine came round to see me recently. As she walked in I absent-mindedly looked down at her shoes. Instant reaction: "Oh don't look!", she exclaimed, "I bought them over the weekend and I have so many pairs already. I knew I shouldn't, but once I'd seen them I couldn't put them out of my mind till I'd got them". Finally she admitted, "Ruth, I think I've got a problem. I can't stop buying things. Even when I know I shouldn't, I just give in. I've got no control over myself and I need to get it sorted".

My friend's confessions are nothing astounding and would be echoed by countless millions around the world – and probably by many of us reading this paper! This is because consumerism is something that has been specifically cultivated over recent decades. To put it at its simplest, it is the culture whereby our primary activity and focus is consuming things, rather than producing them.

In the post-war years there was an era of mass consumption on an unprecedented scale as a productivity boom led to a capacity to supply goods and services which far outstripped demand. The only way to deal with this was to stimulate that demand: in other words, to produce a desire to consume. This led to all the marketing ploys with which we are now so familiar: advertising, built in obsolescence, the promotion of credit cards and the opening up of new markets such as the teenagers – and now the 'tweenagers' - and the yuppie market. I gave a talk recently on consumerism at which I called out various slogans and wasn't surprised to find that most people there knew the products that went with them – the adman has done his job well!

The result is that consumerism has now become the dominant force in our society and, as such, it carries with it some very powerful values. We are led to believe both that, 'I shop therefore I am' and that, 'you are what you buy'. In other words, a person's identity and significance is defined by what they consume, whether that be their house, car, holiday, hair product, clothes or whatever. The advertisements all around us ensure that we know the difference between a Volvo or a New Fiesta driver and a Hamlet smoker or a Bacardi drinker. Thus, goods are valued for what they mean as much as for their use.

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<sup>19</sup> Taken from T. Sine, *Mustard Seed Vs. McWorld*, 238-239.

In the past, a person's identity was bound up with their family, their faith, their values and their location. Now, identity is primarily found in what we consume and often a person will build their supporting community around their consumption habits. If you don't believe that, think of your family and friends and ask yourself to what extent your bonding with them is done around the things you consume (eg. dinner out, a shopping trip)? How much of your conversation is about activities or objects of consumption?<sup>20</sup>

The consumer culture is profoundly individualistic and self-centered. In this way it is closely identified with Postmodernity which stresses the autonomy of the individual and the individual's rights to have whatever they want and to be whatever they want. After all, the customer is always right.

Holding pride of place in all of this is money: the all-important factor. Without it one cannot consume and so money is endlessly presented as having the ability to bring status, power, freedom and hence that elusive prize: happiness. Indeed, happiness is what it's all about. Consumerism is, at its heart, the ultimate pursuit of happiness and fulfilment. It offers us a life in which nothing goes wrong. The road is always empty, the dish is always full; the colours are always bright, the clothes are always white; the hair is always perfect and the man nearly so...

We may laugh at this, but the reality is that consumerism has come at a price and it has effected the most important areas of our lives. We approach our relationships through our consumer lenses. We try our relationships on for size to see if they meet our expectations and fulfil our needs. If they don't then we simply put them back on the shelf and try another one. Our relationships suffer, too, as we have to work increasingly longer hours in order to keep up with the pressure that is on us to consume more and more.

Religion, too, has succumbed to consumerism. People shop around to find the religion, or church, that fits them best. Commitment is at an all-time low: if it doesn't suit our needs then we move on somewhere else. Consumerism effects our faith and the danger for us is that we develop a compartmentalised Christianity that has no connection between our faith on a Sunday morning and how we spend our money the rest of the week.<sup>21</sup> Tom Wright talks about the danger of Christianity in our society becoming "simply a warmth-in-the-heart religion instead of a kingdom-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven religion". He warns of a Christianity which becomes "focused on me and my survival, my sense of God, my spirituality, rather than outwards on God, and on God's world that still needs the kingdom-message so badly".<sup>22</sup>

The global picture of consumerism is of a world struggling to meet the demand for more, more, more. The fashion designer, Katherine Hamnett, has teamed up with Cred to produce a t-shirt with the words written on it, "how you spend controls what happens on the planet". There are many causes of poverty: sinful personal choices, disasters, lack of technology, western colonialism, corruption and so on, but we have to recognise that our consumerism is a part of the unjust structures that contribute to world poverty and environmental degradation.<sup>23</sup> Whilst the issues may be complicated and vast, we do, again, have a choice as to how we live our lives and how we spend our money. Sider expresses it well: "we face a painful choice. To maintain and expand our material abundance, we are polluting our air and water, and destroying our lands and forests. We simply cannot continue these present economic patterns, *and* reduce global poverty, *and* preserve a liveable planet all at the same time. We could choose both justice for the poor and a liveable planet – but only if we give up rampant materialism and make hard choices to reverse environmental destruction".<sup>24</sup>

#### *A biblical understanding of money and possessions*

Let us consider now what the Bible has to say into this situation: what can it teach us in this area of simplicity? It is important to start with God's creation of the world – and his declaration of it as being

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<sup>20</sup> T. and C. Sine, *Living on Purpose*, 138-139.

<sup>21</sup> Sine, *Living on Purpose*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Wright, *For All God's Worth* (page number unknown).

<sup>23</sup> See R. Valerio, "Globalisation and Poverty.

<sup>24</sup> Sider, *Rich Christians*, 166.

GOOD. In the first chapters of Genesis we have a totally positive account of creation. Before the curses brought by the Fall there is no repudiation of the material world, but a thorough embracing of it.

Throughout the Old Testament there appear two strands regarding money and possessions. On the one hand, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with having either and, indeed, some parts of the Old Testament do see them as part of the promises of Yahweh for those who live according to his ways (eg. Lev. 26; 3-5; Deut. 28: 1-14). God is seen as a God of tremendous blessing and generosity: a God who rescued his people *out* of poverty, rather than calling them into it! ! Wealth creation is a positive calling that God gives a person and to be denied that ability can be a denial of God's purposes for our lives (for example, the story of Joseph in Gen. 39:2-6, and Prov.3:9-10). We have been placed in a world full of plenty and our response to that should not be to reject that plenty, but rather to steward it effectively.

On the other hand, it is too simplistic simply to see wealth as a reward for covenant faithfulness and other voices in the Old Testament warn of its dangers (such as is seen in many of the kings who 'did evil in the eyes of the Lord'). It is worth noting, too, that Blomberg (amongst others) is clear that material blessing as a necessary reward from Yahweh is one strand of teaching that does *not* carry through into the New Testament.<sup>25</sup> In particular, the Old Testament is clear that a person's money or property should never be gained at the expense of another, who is thereby left in a poorer state, and the prophets provide us with a strong denunciation of the situation of gross inequality that arose within Israel (eg. Ez. 22:29; Amos 8: 4-6).

When we turn to look at Jesus we will be disappointed if we hope to find him only concerned with individual piety! The fact that giving is as important as praying and fasting to him (Matt. 6) and that, apart from the Kingdom of God, Jesus talks more about money than about anything else, demonstrates how crucial this issue was to him. Jesus was very clear that we cannot serve both God and Mammon/Money (Matt. 6:24) and taught strongly about the dangers of money. He described riches as a strangler (Lk. 8:14) and as a worry (Lk. 12:22-34). Money can blind us to the eternal realities of life (Lk. 16: 19-31) and indeed can be a curse for us (Lk. 6:20,24).<sup>26</sup>

More positively, Jesus gives us the flip-side to why we should not be preoccupied with money: because we should *seek first* the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). In a wonderful passage, Jesus challenges head-on our society's obsession with material things (our 'treasures') and instead puts before us the values of the Kingdom (Matt. 6:19-34).<sup>27</sup>

Jesus' message of radical kingdom economics is summed up in two incidents in his life. Firstly, in Lk. 19, Zacchaeus shows us a person who, before meeting Jesus, put all his trust and value in his wealth. Martin Luther once said, "every person needs two conversions: one of the heart and one of the wallet" and here we see a person demonstrating these two conversions working together. Zacchaeus' money was earned at the expense of the poor people of Jericho and he knew that the only appropriate response on meeting Jesus was to give back all that money – four times over! As he gave away half of his possessions to the poor and then paid people back four times, we can only guess at the financial effects that had on him. It is unlikely he would have been rich after that. Here was no giving away of his surplus in order to make him feel better: this was a radical outworking of the Jubilee principle.

The second incident in Jesus' life was his observation of the widow giving her two very small copper coins (Lk. 21). In contrast to all the wealthy people who were also putting their gifts into the temple treasury, Jesus recognises that "this poor widow has put in more than all the others". Again, we see how different the values of the Kingdom are to the values of society. In our world, it is size and numbers that count: we are praised for the amount we give. In Jesus' eyes what matters is how much we have left afterwards and the sacrifice that we have been prepared to make.

The early church continued Jesus' economic ethic, as the pictures given in the early chapters of Acts bear out. What is envisaged here is not communal living with the abolition of private property – clearly people

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<sup>25</sup> Blomberg, Neither Poverty Nor Riches: a biblical theology of possessions, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Kraybill, The Upside-down Kingdom, 114-129.

<sup>27</sup> The Message Bible gives an excellent re-reading of this passage.



throughout the early church owned their own houses and fields etc – but a community that put others’ needs before their own and where members were prepared to give of their own possessions and money in order to see others’ needs met. The call was to share God’s blessings with His followers but also not to neglect the poor with whom they came into contact.

Paul uses the collection for the church in Jerusalem as an opportunity to demonstrate that the Christian’s attitude towards, and use of, money is not a peripheral issue. In his letters we get a glimpse of the early church reaching more into the middle and upper classes.

In particular, the church at Corinth ran into problems through people expecting to be able to use their wealth to buy power within the church and Paul again sets out the contrast between Jesus’ way and the world’s way. James more famously picks this up and his words contain a strong challenge for us today: do we treat people differently according to their financial status? How does our faith outwork itself (see also 1 Jn. 3:17)?

With this understanding of money and possessions undergirding us, we can also see that the Bible has much to say to our consumer culture. In the Old Testament a fundamental law is that of keeping the Sabbath. This laid important principles regarding rest and trusting God. It speaks to our culture of incessant work, reminding us that our work is not the be-all-and-end-all and that *we* are not the be-all-and-end-all. It confirms that, rather than economic achievement, relationship with God, with one another and with our world is at the heart of what it means to be human and, hence, is our ultimate destiny. Were Naomi Klein inclined to see things from a religious perspective, I am sure she would describe the railroading of Sunday trading by the big businesses as a significant component of the ‘branding of culture’.

Matthew 6 is a passage that speaks directly to our situation. Here, the gauntlet is laid down: what do we put our security in? Is it in God’s provision or in our material possessions? Which are more important to us? What are we investing in for the long-term? Do we have an eternal perspective when we consider these things? How important are clothes and food to us? Do we ‘run after these things’ rather than the Kingdom of God?

A vital biblical theme for simplicity, that is so important for us to recover today, is that of contentment. Consumerism makes us think that we need more and more and creates a continual dissatisfaction that is temporarily expunged by a trip to the shops (‘retail therapy’!). Its message is that we are not rich enough, beautiful enough, smart enough etc. In direct opposition to these messages, the voices of the Bible tell us to be content: “keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have” (Heb. 13:5, see also Phil. 4:11-12 and 1 Tim. 6:6-10). Contentment comes from being secure in the knowledge that money and possessions are not the focus of our lives: that honour belongs to Jesus.

In Phil. 4: 11-12, Paul talks of being content whatever the circumstances: not just knowing when to say that we have enough, but being content even when things are hard. A positive understanding of suffering is relevant here since we are bombarded with messages that tell us that it is our right to be healthy and wealthy and beautiful and that our goal is personal happiness based on these things. The reality of the Christian life is that Jesus promises no such thing. In fact, the Bible represents the life of faith as a generally hard, unrewarding and even painful experience and Jesus speaks of it as a cross. Rather than expecting to experience a carefree life with no suffering, Christians can expect instead to find the grace and strength to go through these things knowing that, ultimately, they are victorious in Christ.<sup>28</sup>

Rom. 12:1-2 urges: “do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds”. This is as true now as it ever has been. Describing the culture of consumerism as Boom City, the Sines write, “what has happened is that we haven’t just moved into Boom City, Boom City has moved into us. More than we recognise, Boom City has branded us and defined, even for people of vital faith, what is important and what is of value. We have unwittingly allowed Boom City to write the mission statement for our lives and families, but few of us seemed to notice”. They go on to say, “we will only find God’s best when we refuse to conform any longer to the aspirations and values of Boom City

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<sup>28</sup> Rom. 8: 31-39.

and invite God to transform our inmost sense of what is important and of value which will in turn change the direction and tempo of our lives”.<sup>29</sup>

Learning simplicity in our money is about learning to value the important things in life. It is about developing freedom from the compulsion to accumulate things and to want to be more wealthy. For this to happen, we find that simplicity is as much about an inner simplicity as an outer practice. None of the outward things that we might associate with simplicity are able to happen if we do not gain an inner simplicity. Or, rather, they may happen, but they will be legalistic and self-righteous and, more than likely, guilt-inducing!<sup>30</sup> Thus simplicity in our money is about developing a heart that is full of thankfulness and gratitude, content with what we have and even willing to reduce it in order to see other people’s needs met.

As followers of Jesus we live by a different story to that told by our culture. We know that we do not need to be surrounded by ‘stuff’ in order to find fulfilment. As we simplify our lives and refuse to be shackled by the chains of consumerism so we will discover a new sense of joy and liberation.

#### *Treading more lightly on the earth*

As we have already seen, a key aspect of simplicity is living in a way that enhances our relationship with the world around us that God has created. Our current consumption habits – the way we choose to spend our money - serve only to destroy that relationship. Climate change, deforestation, the depletion of the ozone layer, the loss of species, intensive farming, pollution and the erosion of soil and biodiversity are all caused by our patterns of living, particularly in the wealthier countries.<sup>31</sup>

Again, we have to start by looking at our inner attitudes before moving to our outer actions. How do we view the world? Do we see it simply as the environment in which we live – something that serves no purpose other than our own benefit with no intrinsic worth of its own? Or, do we see it as St. Francis saw it when he talked of “brother earth” and “sister moon”? The more we become aware of the inherent value of the rest of creation, of its place in God’s plans for salvation and of its role in leading us to worship our Creator the more we will want to ensure that our lives are having as little negative impact on the earth as possible.

Simplifying our consumption habits will have a great effect on our world. Primarily, we will want to live in a way that consumes as little fossil fuel as possible. The burning of fossil fuels is the main cause of climate change and hence the biggest threat to our world today. For example, fossil fuels are used every time we turn on the ignition in our cars and so as part of exploring simplicity we will want to reduce our car dependency and walk, cycle or use public transport wherever possible. This has benefits beyond the reduction of fossil fuel usage. For one, it will improve our fitness, helping us take care of our bodies. How many people do you know who drive to the leisure centre in order to sit on a mechanised bike or run on a treadmill for twenty minutes?! It will also enhance our contact with what and who is around us. We will often go past the same people each day and, with a bit of initiative, it won’t take long for smiles and then friendly greetings to be exchanged. Similarly, I love watching the seasons go past: the same trees, parks and gardens can look so different depending on the time of year, yet each stage has its own beauty and its own reasons to elicit praise.

Every time we eat food that has been produced intensively and transported thousands of miles to reach our plates we are also using fossil fuels.<sup>32</sup> Simplicity involves rediscovering the connection between our food and the land; eating local, organic food wherever possible and taking the time to grow our own. This, again, has benefits beyond that of reducing environmental damage. Eating organic, locally produced

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<sup>29</sup> T. and C. Sine, *Living on Purpose: Finding God’s best for your life*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> This is a point particularly emphasised by Richard Foster in *Freedom of Simplicity*, 8-9.

<sup>31</sup> The financial and trading policies of the ‘Big 3’ (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation) are intricately woven into this but this paper is not the place for an explanation of how this works. For more detail, see M. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, chapters 1 and 2 especially.

<sup>32</sup> Intensive agriculture is one of the highest users of fossil fuels as the chemicals used in production come primarily from oil and mechanised farming systems use vast amounts of energy.

food helps us remember that our food does not originate in plastic bags in the bright lights of a supermarket, but that it comes from the ground and that labour has gone into growing or rearing it. In the case of animals, if we decide not to be vegetarian, it establishes a closer connection with them: a connection that brings responsibility for the quality of their lives. In a culture where we have everything whenever we want it, the restriction of the seasons brings its own freedoms: not least the joy of actually eating food that tastes wonderful! The idea of seasons is a thoroughly biblical concept and helps us appreciate the rhythms that are in life and the patience that that engenders.

Fundamentally, food has a profoundly spiritual dimension to it. It is one of the main ways by which we nourish ourselves and our relationships with each other and it is no coincidence that the Bible so often links food/eating with central biblical concepts (communion, water of life, fasting, “taste and see that the Lord is good”, the eschatological banquet and so on). Indeed, Michael Schut sees food as a sacrament and talks of “the spirituality embodied in our personal and cultural relationship to food”.<sup>33</sup> I see the food I eat as one of the ways in which I worship God: eating in ways that respect what he has created, both human and non-human.

There are many other things that we can do to reduce our fossil fuel usage. Plastic is made from oil, so we should ensure we recycle any plastic we can and reduce the amount that we use in the first place by taking old carrier bags with us to the shops, avoiding over-packaged goods and trying to buy products made from sustainable sources instead (such as FSC certified wood). Our heating, hot-water systems and household appliances all require fossil fuels to power them and so using them as carefully as possible is important. There is a huge variety of things we can do to help reduce both climate change and the other problems that our world faces.<sup>34</sup> The complexities of our society bear heavily on our world and the call of simplicity is for us to lighten our tread.

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*Consider:*

- In a survey by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation over 95% of respondents said that they found offensive any questioning about how they spent their money and about whether the choices they were making could be improved upon. Would you put yourself in that 95%?
- Do your possessions define your identity? How do you establish your self-esteem?
- Do you consider the impact of your consumption patterns on other people and on the earth?

*Take action*

- Edgar Hoover once famously said, “ a budget tells your money where to go, otherwise you wonder where it went”! If you do not already do this, work out a budget so that you know exactly what your money is doing. Then, get together with a friend who is a mature Christian and show them your budget. Ask them to comment and advise.
- Take one step that will help you use your money more for the benefit of others. When you have done that, take another step!
- Sort through your clothing/kitchen cupboards/whole house (!) and box up anything that you don't need or use. If, after three months, you have not opened the box at all, give it all away.
- When you go shopping, take this list of questions with you:
  - ✓ Do I really need this product? Why?
  - ✓ Is this an impulsive purchase or have I planned it?
  - ✓ Have I done research to find the best product to meet my needs?
  - ✓ Do I know the environmental consequences of this purchase?
  - ✓ Does this produce meet fair trade standards?
  - ✓ Can I borrow it? Share it with someone? Buy it second hand?
  - ✓ Was it made or grown locally, perhaps saving energy and packing?

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### 3. Work

<sup>33</sup> M. Schut, “Food as Sacrament”, in *Earth Letter* (Nov. 2001), 11.

<sup>34</sup> An excellent book to help explore this further is *The Ecologist, Go M.A.D! 365 Daily Ways to Save the Planet* (Think Publishing) 2001.

It does not take a genius to work out that simplicity in our time and simplicity in our money may well have implications on our work. We are looking in this paper at simplifying our lives down in the face of our society's constant demands: developing a life of awareness and rhythm that enables us to focus on our relationships with God, with one another and with the created world. For many of us, work (including travel) can take up sixty or seventy percent of our waking hours. It is what the biggest portion of our lives is given over to and what can inform who we are more than anything else and, thus, is a hugely important area for consideration.

The first thing that we need to recognise is that a job is, by definition, something that we get paid for.<sup>35</sup> There are a number of different reasons for paid employment: earning money, gaining a sense of security, tradition, enjoyment, duty, to serve others, learning, prestige and status, power, socialising, personal growth, success, creativity, fulfilment, time structuring... . Which of these apply to you? More broadly, however, work has two functions - the financial function and the personal function. Both of these functions may be met in our jobs. For others of us, our job may meet primarily the financial need and the other types of rewards are met in unpaid activities.<sup>36</sup>

Considering our jobs in this way helps free us from the fatalistic sense that we *have* to do whatever job we are currently doing and opens our eyes to other possibilities. We looked earlier at the issue of choices and at how many of us may be living our lives now because of choices we made earlier that were bound by cultural expectations. This applies to our work situation as much as to anything else. Why are we doing what we are doing? Is it what we want to do? Is it what we believe God is calling us to do?

Some of us have got ourselves caught up in the materialistic rat race that so many people are running. Ellen Goodman sums this up well: "normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for, in order to get to the job you need so you can pay for the clothes, car and the house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it".<sup>37</sup>

Looking at our work in this way gives us the opportunity to re-appraise the jobs we are in and ask ourselves if there are any changes that we want to begin to make.

James' story is a good example. He was a City lawyer, specialising in the investigation of international bank fraud, when he was first challenged about the claims of the Christian faith by a barrister. Three years of forensic investigation later, he accepted that what was written in the Gospels was true. But, it made no difference, of course, as an intellectual faith is no faith in reality. He was in Hong Kong on a fraud investigation and heard the testimonies of some of the ex-heroin addict triad gangsters who worked with Jackie Pullinger. It was their tales that brought it home to him that if Christ had risen, He was alive and at work today. Then everything changed! It took another two years for him to accept that he could not take God his way, but had to go God's way but, once he had, he left law to go and work with Jackie Pullinger. Whilst working there, he felt God calling him back to the UK but this time to set up a People's Bank, working with people who are not able to get access to the usual high street banks. From a large house in an upmarket part of London, he and his family now live in a bungalow in a run-down area and their time is given to home-schooling their children and working with people in need. John's story is not about moving from a non-Christian to a Christian option: investigating international bank fraud could be a high Christian calling. Rather, what John's story illustrates is his willingness to change in the light of what he felt God was asking of him.

Many of us reading this paper may well be in a position to do something similarly radical with our work situations. However, let's not be under any illusions: many of us aren't! For the majority of us our jobs simply help us keep our heads above water in our fast-moving society. Work in the UK is currently in some kind of crisis as people find themselves working longer and longer hours. In fact, we work the longest hours of any country in the EU. Research shows that many managers have no time for other

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<sup>35</sup> The Concise English Dictionary.

<sup>36</sup> Domingues and Robin would go further and state that the only purpose served by paid employment is getting paid and they stress that the other personal aspects are all equally available in unpaid activities (J. Domingues and V. Robin, *Your Money or Your Life*, 229-230).

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in J. Luhrs, *The Simple Living Guide* (page number unknown)

interests and believe their work damages their health, as well as affecting their relationships with their children and partner.<sup>38</sup>

Our society is characterised by an unprecedented stress on work, linking back to what we have seen about consumerism. We live in a skewed world of values in which human fulfilment is seen as being an escape from work and necessity, but in which the means to do this is still through human work and achievement. Thus we work, in order to increase our wealth, in order to achieve leisure.<sup>39</sup> Work is rarely seen as an end in itself.

This is in direct contrast with the Biblical testimony. Here, work (whether paid or unpaid) is good in-and-of-itself: something which is God-ordained for people to do. In Gen. 1:26-28 and 9:7 we see that God made us to work. Work is an indispensable part of what it means to be human and God himself is even described as doing work (Gen. 2:2 and elsewhere). Work is thus an important aspect of our self-fulfilment as people, rather than something to be avoided at all costs!<sup>40</sup> The search for excellence and achievement are not disparaged, but positively encouraged (as seen, for example, in the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 35).

However, at the same time, work is not the means to salvation and there is a negative side to work, as seen in the curse of the Fall. Work can be hard and painful and, certainly, it can be used for wrong ends rather than positive creativity.

It need also be remembered that work is not the be-all-and-end-all: the end of God's week finished with a day to rest. Our lives should have a rhythm to them that includes time set aside to rest and time that is specifically dedicated to worshipping God. Our calling (our 'vocation' if you like) is not limited to work, it also includes friendship, play, love, worship and rest.<sup>41</sup>

Because of faulty theologies that have permeated the church (particularly those which created a sacred-secular divide) we have seen our workplaces as places that we have to go to in order to survive, as opposed to our churches which is where the *real* work of being a Christian takes place. Thus we may spend hours of our day working in the supermarket, but it's the two hours that we spend running the youth work that gets the attention. Instead of this, we need to develop what Mark Greene describes as 'faith consciousness': a deliberate awareness of God's presence in our workplaces and an integration of our faith, our work and the rest of our lives.<sup>42</sup>

All of these different aspects are what simplicity in our work is all about. For some of us it will mean quitting our jobs or going part-time and doing something very different. For others of us it will mean looking at how simplicity in our time and in our money effects the way we approach and carry out our work in a job situation that is not going to change. Remembering the emphasis on our relationships with God, one another and the rest of creation, how can we embrace each of those in our work situation?

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*Consider:*

- As you simply your time and simplify your money, what implications does that have on the work you are doing?
- Is there an attitude about your work that you need to change?

*Take Action:*

- Reclaim five minutes of your working day to reflect on God's presence in your activity.
- Do two things that will make your place of work more socially and environmentally friendly.

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<sup>38</sup> From the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity website.

<sup>39</sup> P.A. Marshall, "Work", in New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology, 900.

<sup>40</sup> J. Stott, Issues Facing Christians Today, 166.

<sup>41</sup> P.A. Marshall, "Work", 899.

<sup>42</sup> M. Greene, supporting Christians at work.

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## Conclusion

We have looked at many things throughout the course of this **Cred Paper**: things that go right to the heart of the way our society operates. If this paper has kindled a desire in you for a different way of life, then perhaps it might be helpful to finish by considering how we might put some of these things into practice.

Firstly, I would like to suggest that we develop an intentionality about this way of life. By this I mean that it is all too easy to read a paper of this nature and think vaguely that it would be a nice thing to see this happen, but then the general run of our everyday lives mean that we never actually get round to doing anything about it. Yes, the idea of walking somewhere instead of driving really is very attractive and the thought of cooking a meal for a friend really does appeal, but, somehow, it all takes too much effort and it is much easier just to get into the car or stay in front of the TV. The whole way our society, and hence our lives, is ordered generates large amounts of inertia when it comes to doing anything different. This inertia needs to be broken.

You might find it helpful actually to write down what you would like to do. Ask yourself: what things have sparked you off in this paper? What aspects did you think sounded particularly attractive? Which areas were you challenged on? What would you like to do differently? As you think through the answers, write them down: the very act of doing so can begin the transformation from desire to action.

From there, an excellent thing to do is to write a 'mission statement'. Here is one that has been written by some friends:

As a family we seek to love God with everything we've got and to put others first.

This to be done in a context of our family values.

1. Shalom: Living in active peace with God, oneself, one's neighbour and all of creation

2. Simplicity: "Living simply that others may simply live"

3. Spirituality: Including God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in each moment, each decision, and each opportunity.

We seek to build a geographically located community expressing the character and values of the Trinity. This will seek to inspire other effective, varied and practical expressions of community for the Glory of God.

This gives our friends a framework within which they have chosen to operate and a plumbline that they can measure their day to day lives against.<sup>43</sup>

Once you have done this it is important to find one other person, or group of people, who also want to walk this road of simplicity. To begin to realise these things – both the inner and the outer aspects of simplicity – goes against the grain of our culture (sadly, this may be the case in many of our churches too) and hence are hard to manage on our own. To choose not to move to a bigger house, even though we can afford to do so, and give away the extra money that we would have spent on a larger mortgage; to refuse the smart company car and ask for one that guzzles less fuel; to decide to turn off the TV and sit in silence instead; to insist on leaving work at a decent time each evening to be with family or friends; to take the trouble of buying local, organic food rather than popping to the supermarket: all of these acts, and many more that we will want to do, take guts and do not come easily. By talking these things through with other people we can hold one another to account and will be encouraged to persevere along the path we have chosen.

For, as we have seen already, simplicity is a choice and it is one that bears continual relevance for living in this world as followers of Jesus. As Foster says, "our century thirsts for the authenticity of simplicity; the spirit of prayer, and the life of obedience. May we be the embodiment of that kind of authentic living".<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For more on this, see T. and C. Sine, *Living on Purpose*.

<sup>44</sup> R. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 14.

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