

What Does Simple Living Have to Do with Christianity?

Bryce Geiser

The smells of love feast are indelibly stamped into my memory. As a young boy, I sat on an old wooden bench just outside the kitchen of the meetinghouse and watched my mother cut bread for soup and make coffee. The deacons were busy cooking the beef that would serve hundreds of hosts the next couple of days, and the steam from the cooker condensed on the window behind me and ran down in long streams. Love feast smelled good!

In my heritage, the love feast was a broad term that took in social meals, preaching, the Lord's Supper, and the communion. Now I know that for most of you, the Lord's Supper and the communion are one and the same—but originally the communion (Eucharist) was taken at an evening meal. This is evident from 1 Corinthians 11, and the Apostle Paul is clearly not happy about it. But what, exactly, was he unhappy with?

Many people assume that his objections have to do with making the communion into a social meal. History, however, does not bear that out. And besides, if we look closer, it is fairly obvious what made Paul so unhappy:

For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken.
1 Co. 11.21

The fact that one is hungry and another is drunk is what makes Paul so upset. The church seems to have become segregated. Those with fine biscuits and broiled fish gathered in one corner and ate it, hoping that none of the poor families would come begging. The poor families sat in another corner without anything to eat and wondered how it was that at the Lord's Table they could be so hungry. Of this gathering, Paul vehemently declares that it is *not* the Lord's Supper. Whoever heard of someone going away hungry from the Lord's Table?

The whole situation was a sham. They were, in Paul's words, despising the church of God and shaming those who had nothing. Their gathering was a damnation. In the first place, there should have been a greater effort to maintain equality, and in the second, by claiming that this was actually the Lord's Supper, they were blaspheming. When God sets a table, most assuredly no one goes away hungry.

Remember when God prepared a table in the wilderness, by sending manna? Which of the children of Israel were actually hungry? None. The Scriptures say that he who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.

Remember when Jesus fed the 5000? Who left from that table hungry? No one, for it says there was a lot left over after all had eaten.

We can be sure of this, that when Jesus sets a table, there will be enough. When He eats, *all* shall eat. No one should go away hungry.

Pass the liver, please

Have you ever had this problem at your house? It's clean-out-the-pantry night, and Mother sets on various small dishes of leftovers. Here comes the first dish, leftover corn. It is fairly easy to divide by eight and pass it on. But now there are two pieces of leftover pizza. Uh-oh! Those are high demand leftovers. What shall I do, cut them into eight pieces? The next dish has leftover liver. Perhaps I can take the pizza and leave the liver for the others. But is that fair? What is my share of the food, anyhow?

Yes, what is my share? How much shall I consume?

Taking a fair share

Sometimes I feel I am seated at a table with seven billion other people, all inhabitants of the earth. As the dishes come around, I feel perplexed about the same question: What is my share of this? A truckload of corn, a barrel of propane, an electric pipeline ... but what is my share? I don't want to take too much, and leave the people on the other end with only an empty plate.

If I have enough money to buy it, does that make it right? If so, then I am very lucky to have been born in a place and time where this is available to me. Perhaps I need not worry. Maybe the people on the other end of the table have enough.

On the other end of the table are one billion people, one seventh of the world's population, who are called the world's poor. It is helpful to imagine what it would be like to trade places with them. Economist Robert Heilbrone describes it like this:

We begin by invading the house of (the) imaginary American family to strip it of its furniture. Everything goes: beds, chairs, tables, television set, lamps. We will leave the family with a few old blankets, a kitchen table, a wooden chair. Along with the bureaus go the clothes. Each member of the family may keep in his “wardrobe” his oldest suit or dress, a shirt or blouse. We will permit a pair of shoes for the head of the family, but none for the wife or children.

We move to the kitchen. The appliances have already been taken out, so we turn to the cupboards ... The box of matches may stay, a small bag of flour, some sugar and salt. A few moldy potatoes, already in the garbage can, must be hastily rescued, for they will provide much of tonight’s meal. We will leave a handful of onions, and a dish of dried beans. All the rest we take away: the meat, the fresh vegetables, the canned goods, the crackers, the candy.

Now we have stripped the house: the bathroom has been dismantled, the running water shut off, the electric wires taken out. Next we take away the house. The family can live in the tool shed ...

Those are the poorest people at this huge table, one billion of them. They typically earn less than \$75 per year. Think of that! Why, many of us can earn that much money by noon. Is it because we are Christians? No, it is because we were born in the right time and at the right place.

Who is the rich man?

How about basic needs like cereal grains? Listed below are the amounts of cereal grains consumed per capita in various parts of the world

United States	1850
Europe	1000

Asia (developed)	600
Developing Countries	200-300
United States	11,485
Europe	5000
China	632
Most others	200-300

We might also look at energy consumed, measured in equivalent kilograms of coal per person.

These are the people sitting at the table with us. Truly, one is hungry and another drunken. And I am the one who is drunken.

I protest. I do not feel personally responsible for the fact that people in Sao Paulo or Nicaragua or Ethiopia do not have enough. And furthermore, it isn’t simple. I cannot make people pass things around this table. I believe I am telling the truth, that if I could, I would make sure everyone on earth had enough food.

Unfortunately, the world’s poor do not know that. They believe that somehow I *am* responsible, at least in a collective, passive sense, for their suffering. They do not understand, any more than I, why it is that way. Many people in the “third world” think of North America when they read James 5:5.

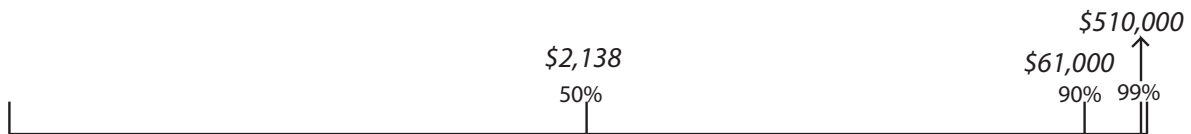
You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter.

It doesn’t help that North American businesses routinely exploit those people and keep their wages low. It doesn’t help either that we North Americans love buying those cheap goods from people who live in poverty.

And yet, those problems are too big for me to solve. Many people have spent their whole lives trying to help developing countries, and they do not make much progress. The problems of distribution and human greed are huge. What can I do about it?

Just how rich are you, anyways?

The following graph can help us grasp our position in this world. Are we among the rich, or the poor? To attain the top 1% of this world’s wealthy elite, one needs to have \$510,000 in assets (minus debts). To hit the top ten percent of wealthy folks, \$61,000 is necessary. Want to make the world’s top half? \$2,138 puts you there! The bottom 50% of the world’s population only has 1% of the world’s wealth, altogether.



(The World Distribution of Household Wealth, World Institute for Development Economics Research-WIDER.)
http://www.wider.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/discussion-papers/2008/en_GB/dp2008-03/_files/78918010772127840/default/dp2008-03.pdf

I remember love feast and the Lord's Supper. Though I cannot be sure everyone has enough, I *can* do something. I can start taking less. I can stop being a wasteful consumer of goods. I can labor for equal sharing and fair distribution right here in my own fellowship.

I must live simply, lest my Lord come and see that I am drunken while another is hungry.

The middle way

This would be a good time to reflect on a problem, unique to these last days, which makes it so hard to keep perspective. It has to do with the old teaching of simple Christians like the Quakers or the Moravians concerning "the middle way."

"The middle way" was the way of temperance. "Give me neither poverty nor riches" was its guiding principle. Many sincere believers of the simple life preached this "middle class" doctrine. It was not a bad teaching, until something extraordinary happened that no one ever expected. The "middle" shot upward at an astonishing rate. James Bennett describes it this way in a recent magazine article:

Since the beginning of civilization, a well ordered, generally peaceful culture not in the midst of some crisis has typically afforded its inhabitants the equivalent of about \$3 per day. This provides a basic diet, basic clothing, and basic shelter, and not much more. It was the income of an average person in ancient Rome, ancient China, and modern Haiti. Toward the end of the 18th century, something extraordinary began to happen. Throughout all England, this average began to rise rapidly and steadily, not just for a few people, or for some sectors of society, but broadly through almost all levels of society. Within a few decades, the small number of people still living on the equivalent of \$3 were no longer regarded as normal, but rather as particularly poor. As England grew richer, a few other nations—Belgium, the U.S., gradually all of Western Europe, then Japan—started to imitate the measures England had taken, and saw their wealth rise broadly as well.

This broad rising of wealth across all sectors of society meant that the middle went along with it. Today, a "middle way" North American is a long, long ways from an average person past or present.

We must recognize that an average North American, by almost any measurement, is very rich. The most conservative Plain churches in America, with the most stringent simple living ideals, are still quite rich and live very comfortably compared to the last 6000 years.

The doctrine of "the middle way," though it served well for thousands of years, has lost its meaning for us in today's rapidly shifting wealth. In addition, a lifestyle that depends on debt, even to the mortgaging of future generations, is artificial. With our own country so deeply in debt, the lifestyle of many people could plummet quickly in an economic crisis. If ours would also plummet, it might be an indication that it needed to.



**Having two legs doesn't
make you human. Neither
does simple living make
you a Christian.
(But what does a human look like
without two legs? And what does
Christianity look like without
holy simplicity?)**

Losing simplicity

How did it happen that many Plain groups of the past lost their simple-living discipleship? There are many paths away from it, and it is instructive to look at some of them. In 1765, a group of workers in a Moravian colony remarked:

Our Savior observes that we have left our primitive simplicity and that much conformity to worldly values has gradually insinuated itself into the conduct of our congregation. Also, in the way of our trade and business, profit is made a main matter, and that in consideration

thereof the congregation principles are neglected. We study more now to get money and profit, than how to save our souls.

In other words, the principle of the Lord's Table was neglected. Profit and efficiency became the dominant values, and out went the simple life.

How did the Quakers lose their simplicity? By gradually making simplicity a matter of the heart rather than a way of life. And how do churches today, that once were very simple Brethren, Amish, or Mennonite communities, lose their simple living?

Does having two legs make you human?

Again and again, we have people from those groups who visit here and make comments like this:

Well, simple living doesn't save us. A simple life doesn't make a Christian.

I suppose those are good reminders, and of course they are very true. The thing that bothers me is the frequency of these comments. Some people almost stumble over themselves to make sure they repeat these disclaimers often.

I scratch my head. I know that just because you have two arms and two legs, that does not make you a human being. But how often would I tell you that? How often do you need to be reminded that you could be a fake, or that you might die, or that even a mannequin has arms and legs?

I have a hunch that churches who insist on devaluing the simple life, often in Protestant terms, are on the road to losing it in their children. Those people have smelled the bad breath of some simple-living groups, and they have lost contact with how it relates to true, vital Christianity.

In summary

It is *wiser* to live simply. Creation calls me back and begs me to remember my affinity to soil, plants, and animals. I hear the call to simple living in the life of my Savior. The apostles repeat the chorus and enjoin me to pass the time of my pilgrimage here in fear.¹

Finally, at the Lord's Table, I see the principle and an economy that demands temperance; that calls me away from the life of the American consumer with all its waste and gluttony.

I think most of us, after pondering these various paths all leading to the same conclusion, will agree that there is a pretty compelling case for the teaching of simple living in Christianity. But what does this mean for us "upwardly mobile" middle-class Americans?

Please do not rush out and sell your van, pull the phone cord, or turn off the breaker panel. If you do, your life might become quite complex very quickly, which doesn't seem compatible with our goals of living simply. In the next newsletter, I want to address some very real difficulties we all face, and explore the topic of living simply in a context. ~

—Taken from *Caneyville Christian Community News*, July/August 2011

¹ In this paragraph, the author recaps some of his previous articles on the subject of simple living.