

An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Life-style

An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Life-style was written and endorsed by the [International Consultation on Simple Life-style](#), held at Hoddesdon, England, from March 17 to 21, 1980. The Consultation was sponsored by the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization.

5. Personal Life-style

Jesus our Lord summons us to holiness, humility, simplicity and contentment. He also promises us his rest. We confess, however, that we have often allowed unholy desires to disturb our inner tranquility. So without the constant renewal of Christ's peace in our hearts, our emphasis on simple living will be one-sided.

Our Christian obedience demands a simple life-style, irrespective of the needs of others. Nevertheless, the facts that 800 million people are destitute and that 10,000 die of starvation every day make any other life-style indefensible.

While some of us have been called to live among the poor, and others to open our homes to the needy, all of us are determined to develop a simpler life-style. We intend to reexamine our income and expenditure, in order to manage on less and give away more. We lay down no rules or regulations, for either ourselves or others. Yet we resolve to renounce waste and oppose extravagance in personal living, clothing and housing, travel and church buildings. We also accept the distinction between necessities and luxuries, creative hobbies and empty status symbols, modesty and vanity, occasional celebrations and normal routine, and between the service of God and slavery to fashion. Where to draw the line requires conscientious thought and decision by us, together with members of our family. Those of us who belong to the West need the help of our Third World brothers and sisters in evaluating our standards of spending. Those of us who live in the Third World acknowledge that we too are exposed to the temptation to covetousness. So we need each other's understanding, encouragement and prayers.

The Life-style Consultation was a response to the declaration of the Lausanne Covenant that "those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a simple life-style in order to contribute more generously to both relief and evangelism." In 1974, when these words were framed, the life-style debate was only just beginning. By 1980, there was a much greater consciousness of the underlying biblical mandate for it.

So the Consultation was conscious of Jesus' summons to holiness, humility, simplicity and contentment. It was Gottfried Osei-Mensah who, using the New Testament metaphor of an athlete in a contest, called on us to "admonish and help one another get rid of those things that stand in the way of godly and upright character, behaviour and relationships." And Mark Cerbone, the assistant co-ordinator of the Consultation, pointed out that Christian simplicity embraces much more than our economic life-style. It describes an inner attitude of humble joy and peace.

Dr. Rene Padilla showed us that to be free of an inner drive for riches leads to a deep contentment (Philippians 4:11-13), which Paul went on to commend in church leaders: "There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world" (see 1 Timothy 6:6-8).

So it was necessary for us, in the light of the scriptural teaching on holiness, to confess ... that we have often allowed unholy desires to disturb our inner tranquility. This is not to say that simple life-style is to be pursued only for reasons of inner peace, by reducing the covetousness which breeds worry and tension (Luke 12:15), but rather that without the constant renewal of Christ's peace in our hearts, our emphasis on simple living may be purely a matter of economics and even politics, and so be one-sided.

It was agreed that the Scriptures contain many warnings against greed and materialism (e.g., Luke

1:52-53; Mark 10:23f; Luke 12:13-20,33; Matthew 13:22, 6:24), and therefore that our Christian obedience demands a simple life-style, irrespective of the needs of others. But the other side of the coin was very much in our minds because of the presence with us of some very poor Third World participants. So the statement makes an important addition: the facts that 800 million people are destitute in various countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, and that about 10,000 die of starvation every day—appalling statistics which seldom hit the headlines or disturb the affluent but should weigh heavily on the Christian conscience, make any other life-style indefensible. For when the facts of destitution are known, ignorance can no longer be pleaded as an excuse. The cries of the poor can no more be suppressed.

Some of those attending the Consultation knew that they had been called to live among the poor and so to identify with them and to share their poverty. Others did not have this vocation, but knew that they had been rather called to open their homes to the needy, which in the privatised suburban society in which so many Christians live is not always easy to do. Whatever our precise calling—and a diversity of callings was recognized—all of us were determined to develop a simpler life-style. Such a determination has to be related, of course, to our present standard of living, so "simple life-style" is a relative term. Nevertheless, our society in the West is so hooked on rising affluence that any decision to reduce life-style will mark us out from our neighbours and friends, and may be regarded by them as irrational and foolish.

How to begin simplifying our life-style? First, we determined to re-examine our income and expenditure, in order to manage on less, not in order to save more for a "rainy day," but in order to give away more.

The dangers of legalism and regimentation, however, as Ronald Sider rightly warned us, must be avoided. "There is no one life-style that is right for all Christians in one country, or even for all Christians in one congregation. There must be room for the variety and diversity so gorgeously displayed in the creation." So the Consultation declared: we lay down no rules or regulations, for either ourselves or others.

Yet we must be practical and concrete, or the life-style debate will be just "word and speech" rather than actions (1 John 3:18). So we resolved to renounce waste and oppose extravagance in personal living (am I buying it for self-image or status reasons?), clothing (how many outfits do I need?) and housing (will the new setting help make my thinking and living more biblical?), travel (is the journey really necessary?) and church buildings (motives for construction and renovation need to be examined with ruthless honesty).

How is this kind of self-examination going to happen? Why would people sit down and consider changes which may appear to be against their own self-interest? "Only" one participant told the Consultation, "as the Holy Spirit guides individual Christians as they prayerfully seek his will by studying both the Bible and the newspaper, in the context of Christian community." A congregation could decide at an annual business meeting that in the course of the next two years it would try to help each member of the congregation discover what life-style God wills for them. An extended process of Bible study on topics like the biblical perspective on the poor, justice, evangelism, etc., could be initiated. So could in-depth analysis of the facts of evangelistic opportunity and world poverty. As well as sermons and Sunday School classes, people would ideally also be in weekly fellowship groups where each person's or family's expenditure on clothes, housing, transportation, etc., could be examined with gentle thoughtfulness and with the goal of developing a specific budget that each person or family would consider faithful in today's world.

As we do this, we will accept the distinction between necessities and luxuries, for we will not despise the gifts God has given us (1 Timothy 4:4-5) nor the obligation to be responsible for our own family (1 Timothy 5:8). We will learn to discern between creative hobbies and empty status symbols, for we recognise both the legitimacy of recreational activities on the one hand, and on the other the warnings of Jesus about the hunger for honour and deference (Mark 12:38,39), as in

the Pharisees who "loved praise from men more than praise from God" (John 12:43). How to discriminate between modesty and vanity and between occasional celebrations and normal routine can be a matter for discussion with people outside the family circle as well as within it. A supportive context for living this kind of life-style is indispensable. Sociologists have discovered that people tend to accept the beliefs and values of the people with whom they live. There was a very strong temptation in the West in the 1970s to keep up with the trends, but Christians should be able to perceive the difference between the service of God and slavery to fashion. These five distinctions deserve to be pondered carefully. They show that the Consultation had no mind to reject the good gifts of a good Creator, and no wish to impose on themselves or others a drab or joyless asceticism.

Not that the distinctions can always be made with ease. Where to draw the line requires conscientious thought and decision by us, together with members of our family. Moreover, we will always need to offer others the option of seeing their obedience in different terms. Legalism is pernicious, and judging others for following a different life-style would be a denial of the body of Christ.

One difficulty is that what may seem to Christians in developed countries a dramatic voluntary reduction in life-style may appear to believers in less developed countries a pathetically small step. So those of us who belong to the West need the help of our Third World brothers and sisters in evaluating our standards of spending. Think of how the discussion would change if your family's discussion of a new car took place in the presence of a Christian family from rural Brazil who not only had never possessed a car but were surrounded by poverty, malnutrition and starvation! During the Consultation, it was suggested that we need processes in the world-wide body of Christ by which poor Christians in the inner city and the Third World can help affluent Christians discuss the question of faithful life-styles. Perhaps missionary agencies could develop structures to enable an individual congregation in an affluent context to become a sister congregation to a local church in a developing country. Sister churches would then exchange information about relative budgets.

Such an arrangement would thus be reciprocal. It could be a challenge to poorer churches too, lest they desire the affluence which Western churches are trying to shed. A person does not have to be rich to be guilty of coveting, which Jesus warned us so clearly against (Luke 12:15). So participants from developing countries asked for the following sentence to be added: Those of us who live in the Third World acknowledge that we too are exposed to the temptation to covetousness. So then, white and black, North and South, developed and less developed, we need each other's understanding, encouragement and prayers