

Returning to Our Roots: A Three-fold Argument for Christian Simplicity

by C. Christopher Smith

“God made man simple; Man’s complex problems are of his own devising”
-- Ecclesiastes 7:30, JB.

In recent years, American bookstores have featured many new books and magazines positing all sorts of suggestions for simplifying one’s life. For Christians, however, simplicity is more than a fad. It is a recurring theme in our historic literature-- beginning with the Scriptures and continuing through the works of the Monastics, George Fox, Soren Kierkegaard and Richard Foster, to name just a few. I believe that simplicity recurs in Christian literature because it is essential to the genuine expression of our faith, and in the following paragraphs, I will describe three facets of simplicity that are essential for Jesus’ followers: integrity, community and stewardship.

INTEGRITY

The English word “integrity” comes from the Latin word “integer” (just like whole numbers in math) and means “wholeness.” Integrity implies that every part of our being fits consistently with our beliefs. Thus, it demands that we know intimately both who we are and what we believe. It is not easy in today’s world to take a good, honest look at ourselves. But if we are, through God’s Grace, to grow in integrity, we must begin to ask ourselves questions: What are my gifts? My vulnerabilities? My passions? We also must become firmly rooted in our beliefs, primarily through studying Scripture, attempting to understand its message holistically, and not merely picking out passages that make us feel good.

The words “wholeness” and “holiness” come from the same roots. Christian maturity means growing in wholeness (or integrity), as well as growing in holiness. A breach of integrity is like a lie, which must be justified if we want to continue to live with it. And as any lying child can tell you, matters get complex quickly as we try to patch one lie with others. Integrity brings healing, born of God’s grace, which gradually eliminates our reliance on lies and justifications. As we follow the Holy Spirit’s leading and eliminate contradictions in our lives, we will grow in simplicity and learn to live more harmoniously with our Maker.

COMMUNITY

A second essential facet of simplicity is community. Meaningful relationships are undoubtedly complex and do require a great deal of effort. However, there is an element of simplicity in community that transcends the cost of effort put into relationships, and I would even say that it makes that cost seem pretty trivial. The primary reason, I believe, that we find simplicity in community is that we are called to work together with other Christians. Thus, participation in body of Christ is a matter of integrity. Human beings are innately social creatures, and indeed, God says during creation that it is not good for a person to be alone (Genesis 2:18a). Additionally, Christians are commanded to “not give up meeting together” (Hebrews 10:25).

Community is also essential to our integrity in another way: In community, we ingest the Scriptures in a more powerful way than we ever could on our own. Modern learning theory confirms that study involving social interaction helps us retain what we see and hear. Community, however, spurs not only our knowledge, but also our action. The accountability and encouragement of community brings forth wondrous deeds of service that no individual (or the

sum of all the individuals) could complete. I believe that it is ONLY in community that we can live up to the highest standards of our calling in Christ.

STEWARDSHIP

A third aspect of simplicity, and the one that typically comes to mind, is stewardship. I must make clear, however, that this aspect of simplicity takes a backseat to the previous two. If we are not striving through the Spirit toward integrity and if we are not actively involved in a community of believers, then any attempt to simplify our lives by becoming better stewards will likely find little success. Churches often use “stewardship” to mean one’s giving to the local church, but that is only a small portion of its definition. Being a good steward involves honoring, and thus responsibly using, everything that God has given us. Jesus’ parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14ff) reminds us that we are each given different things. Thus, good stewardship looks different for different people. Stewardship is characterized by the following questions (inspired by Richard Foster’s chapter titled “Simplicity” in *Celebration of Discipline*) that apply to everyone, regardless of their resources.

Am I seeking to honor God with my money and my time? Do I spend more on luxuries for myself than on the Lord’s work? When I purchase something, do I ask: “Why am I buying this? Could I live without it? Does the one I currently have still work? Could I possibly borrow or rent it, or buy it used? Am I buying it merely for the name on its label? Does it respect God’s creation? Was it justly produced? Will it distract me from doing the Lord’s work?”

When I look at the things I have been given, do I ask myself: “What items that I do not use would be appreciated by others? What skills of mine could be used to serve others? What am I addicted to and at what cost? Do I spend more time with things (e.g., television, computers) than I do with people?”

And finally, the most pointed questions: “What will I do with the resources I save by living simply? Indulge myself? Buy more stuff? Or give generously of those resources to others in need?”

Most Christians would agree that integrity, community and stewardship are essential to their faith. However, I maintain that simplicity, grounded in these three tenets, is no less essential. Certainly, the abundance of classic Christian literature on the topic of simplicity would seem to indicate its importance. I believe that by returning to the pursuit of simplicity, the Church will better prepare itself to be God’s ambassadors in our ever-changing culture.

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