

LIFESTYLE

Baptism by total immersion, which is so important in our tradition, symbolises the whole of life being dedicated to Christ and redeemed by him. It is an initiation into a life of radical discipleship. This is crucial to our understanding of how we are to live – no part of our lives are removed from the transforming power of God's Spirit.

Equally, our Baptist understanding of the church has implications for our lifestyle. We believe that the church is composed of those gathered into a new fellowship to be a community which bases itself on the teaching of Jesus as king. So we are mandated to be an alternative society, different from mainstream culture and living by values and standards of the kingdom of God.

THE BASIS

In the Old Testament we learn some basic principles about being the people of God. They were to be obedient to his laws, not out of a sense of duty but out of gratitude to the God who had set his people free from slavery and oppression (Ex 20: 1-17).

They were to be a pilgrim people – ready to move on when God moved. The land and its resources belonged to God – they were only its caretakers (Lev 25:23). God's people were called to adopt a lifestyle that was harmonious with creation (Lev 25:1-5). They were also called to live in harmony with all the children of God. There was to be no room for discrimination against the poor, disabled or immigrant (Lev 19:9-10, 14, 32-34; Deut 15:11). All were to be treated with justice, dignity, respect and generosity. It was to these principles that the prophets continually called the people back. Too quickly the Israelites allowed materialism, nationalism, idolatry and the oppression of the weak to grow and dominate their lifestyle (Is 58:1-9; Amos 2:5-6; 5:11-15).

The New Testament opens with John the Baptist also calling people back to God through a repentance that showed itself in a radical lifestyle (Luke 3:10-14).

The teaching of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, was even more demanding. He stood the normal values of the world on their head and made a radical call to eschew violence and revenge and forgive others: and to let go of self, to 'go the second mile' in caring, to greet those outside one's natural circle of friendships and to love one's enemies (Matt 5-7).

He frequently had strong words to say about wealth (Mark 10:17-31) and worrying about material things (Luke 12:22-34). He echoed the Old Testament concern for the poor and the socially unacceptable (Matt 25:31-46); called for sacrifice and expected his followers to put the work of the kingdom of God before material security (Luke 9:57-62). The call carried conviction because of his own simple lifestyle.

The early church in Acts modelled a high degree of communal living and mutual support. (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). Later, the church was called to give generously, joyfully and regularly as a matter of both grace and justice (2 Cor 8:13-15; 9:6-15; 1 Cor 16:2). The same concern as seen elsewhere for the poor, disadvantaged and marginalised continued (Jas 1:27) and the church was taught to be careful that its words and actions were complimentary (Jas 2:14-20; 5:1-6).

OUR BAPTIST STORY

Baptists have always sought to live by the teaching of the Bible and to re-model the New Testament church in their communities. This has at times led them to be highly alternative in their lifestyles.

The Anabaptists in Reformation Europe were committed to non-violence and refused to bear arms. They were committed to the church as a community, separated from the state, which had the clear intention of living as Jesus had commanded. It led them to unpopularity and persecution.

Over the years the issues have changed but the intention to live out a radical Christian discipleship has always been the same. For some, like William Carey, it has meant turning one's back on the normal comforts of home to serve God overseas. For others, like Muriel Lester, who set up a mission on Bow, it has meant taking a vow of voluntary poverty, working tirelessly and prayerfully to lower the infant mortality rate in the East End and generally improve social conditions in the area. For still others like John Clifford, it has meant not only the life of a Christian pastor but prophetic engagement with the political powers of his day.

The Victorian concern with thrift and teetotalism, which subsequently degenerated into heartless respectability arose, to begin with, as an attempt to be genuine disciples of Jesus no matter how much of a non-conformist one became. Church meetings, of the time, exercised discipline over members who committed adultery, were drunken or bankrupt, because of their commitment to an authentic Christian lifestyle. Today some of the issues may be different, but the commitment should still be the same.

THE AIMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE

Witness

Lifestyle is the visible sign of the work of Christ within. Our love for one another and for those around us, particularly the most vulnerable is a testimony to the love of God (1 John 4). A community that rejects the prevailing norms of society is a sign that there are more significant values to be sought after.

Fellowship

A simpler lifestyle draws the body of Christ closer together through greater interdependence, sharing and pooling. Hospitality and opening homes to people within and beyond the fellowship are important aspects of Christian lifestyle.

Mission

A distinctive lifestyle authenticates the gospel. A simpler lifestyle frees resources for mission. An inclusive lifestyle opens the benefits of Christian love to all people, regardless of colour, status, gender and creed. An environmentally friendly lifestyle is part of God's plan for the redemption of the earth. A dedicated lifestyle is committed to sharing the good news of Jesus throughout the world.

Justice

God's kingdom is a kingdom of righteousness and shalom, that is true wellbeing for all. As citizens of that kingdom we are concerned to live by and spread its values. We anticipated the full realisation of the coming kingdom in the way we live now.

Celebration

Christian lifestyle allows us to celebrate life. Simplifying a lifestyle makes celebration all the more meaningful. Biblical living is modelled on the generosity and joyous spontaneity of God's love and giving (John 12:1-11; Matt 20:1-16), and our celebrations are a foretaste of the joys to come.

ISSUES TO THINK ABOUT

Giving

Giving should be prayerfully considered, sacrificial (Luke 21:1-4), and cheerful (2 Cor 9:7). Many people take the principle of the 'tithes' (ten per cent) as a guideline (Deut 14:22-29; Mal

3:10) and set this aside for God's work, principally to be used by the local church. For some this may be sacrificial; for others however, it should be the very minimum.

Loving

Much of the bible's teaching is about relationships. With nationalism on the march, societies disintegrating, a self-centred enterprise culture reigning and families breaking up as never before, here is a major area where Christians are called to be distinctive. Aspects of that call include concern for the marginalised and disadvantaged; loyalty within marriage; non-retaliation and the refusal to resort to violence; practical commitment to justice for all races. We live 'no longer for ourselves' (2 Cor 5:15).

Buying

Our commitment to care of the earth and its peoples means that we will try wherever possible to avoid products that damage the delicate balance of the earth's natural resources. We will shun unnecessary packaging and support initiatives in recycling and responsible waste management. We will seek to use products that have not exploited people or animals in their manufacture and ensure maximum access to companies such as Triadcraft that promote fair trade and justice for its producers.

Eating

Fasting has long been a Christian discipline which frees time for prayer and symbolises both the recognition of the importance of food in life and the recognition that there are values which are more important.

Meal times are significant for encouraging both abstinence and celebration. Both have their place in Christian living. Many biblical images depict the kingdom of heaven as a place of feasting and plenty, where all kinds of people eat together. Our tables should therefore be open and welcoming.

Some Christians are vegetarians as a response to the original creation ethic (Gen 1:29) and as a means of better stewarding resources in a hungry world.

Simplifying

We need to re-discover the joy of 'voluntary poverty' that some of our forebears knew and practised. It can be fun to find ways of 'doing without', and consciously freeing up money for making life fuller for those who do not have such choices. For example, an electricity fast helps both the environment and the bank balance. It increases fellowship and renews social skills, since there will be no TV, no slaving over a hot stove and no late nights.

Serving

A fellowship of Christians today can imitate the early church by sharing resources and show contemporary society a different way of life.

Consider these examples:

A tool bank. Why do we all need power-tools, lawn mowers, paint strippers, etc? Why not put them in a tool bank at the church and people pay a small hire charge when they borrow them. The money can then be used to renew equipment or buy items that are needed. Baby clothes and equipment can be pooled. Co-operative buying can save money that can be used more usefully. Wholefood co-operatives have worked well in some churches. Can the church premises be used as a recycling depot for the local community?

Praying

A Christian lifestyle is fundamentally characterised by an openness to God and a willingness to be obedient to him. Time for silence, for reflection and time for bringing our suffering world before God should be built into our lives.

Celebrating the discipline of prayer will lead us to greater general self-discipline, greater awareness to the needs of others, greater forgiveness and more active caring.

Earlier generations of Christians spoke much about holiness. What we have considered as 'lifestyle' is a major component of what they meant by holiness. It is not something different. Holiness means being set apart for God, to live as he requires. It is not a withdrawal from the world into some blissful life of an intimate and self-indulgent relationship with God but an obedient and radical living for him in the real world.

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