

Making virtue out of necessity

Energy, inflation, environmental degradation and the call for simpler living

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“Europe has dodged an energy apocalypse this winter, economists and officials say, thanks to unusually warm weather and efforts to find other sources of natural gas after Russia cut off most of its supply to the continent.

Natural gas suppliers in recent months have increased their stocks at a time when they’re usually being drawn down ...[but] the gas that is now imported from other countries is far more expensive than the ‘cheap’ Russian gas before 2022.”¹

As the war in Ukraine goes on, the cost of fossil fuels and cereals are likely to remain high. The International Energy Agency (IEA) warns that we should not get overconfident, and that Europe could still be left short of gas for next winter. The IEA calls for a strong push on renewable energy and efficiency measures to reduce energy-consumption in homes, transport, and industries, calling such steps “vital to head off the risk of shortages and further vicious price spikes next year.”²

Meanwhile, high prices for gas, oil and electricity are eating away at company earnings and consumer spending power and leading to higher prices of transport, food and virtually all commodities. This has set off a Europe-wide spiral of inflation, with two-digit percentages that we haven’t seen since the energy-crisis in the 1970s. For many people, it is difficult to make ends meet, because wages and salaries are not keeping pace with inflation, and because of higher interest rates – the classic response to inflation.

Threefold response of governments

In response, Governments are adopting a threefold policy of (1) subsidising energy costs for households and businesses by capping the prices, (2) stimulating the reduction of energy consumption through incentives and publicity campaigns, and (3) accelerating the shift from fossil sources (oil, gas) to renewable sources of energy (water, wind, and solar).

The ‘energy transition’ policy also includes the promotion of electric vehicles of transport, but scientists and activists as well as ‘green’ parties are not so unhappy with this. While admitting that electrifying the whole car park would considerably reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses, they point out the generation of extra electricity causes extra pollution, alongside the huge environmental costs of extracting minerals and producing batteries for all our electronic devices. Moreover, shifting the mode of energy production does not solve the basic problem of affluent societies, namely their overdependency on energy consumption, be it electric or fossil.

As for nuclear energy, there is a huge debate among politicians and society. Proponents think that it could solve the energy crisis. They also argue that it reduces climate change because it does not produce green-house gasses. Opponents point to the unsolved problem of nuclear waste which is an enormous risk for centuries to come.

This illustrates how the response to the energy and cost-of-living crisis is intrinsically linked to the ecological crisis that we are facing at the same time.

¹ David McHugh, ‘Europe has avoided energy collapse. But is the crisis over?’ *Associated Press News*, January 10, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/politics-europe-russia-government-business-5ad9451c167845e384bbab0723f1dfae>

² Quoted by David McHugh, *op. cit.*

Ecological crisis

Like the Covid-crisis of the last years, the current energy crisis and the cost-of-living crisis can be overcome once the situation changes, for example with the end of the war in Ukraine. The ecological crisis, however, is structural and therefore far more profound. We are dependent on an excessive take on the natural environment that far outweighs its capacity to renew itself, causing pollution, the irreversible loss of biodiversity, climate change and rising sea-level, loss of land, extreme weather conditions, ecological migration and so on. The list is long.

In this respect, the Covid-crisis had the very positive effect that it drastically reduced transport, so that the environment was far less damaged. In 2020, the ‘expiration date’ was postponed by more than a month, however once the crisis was more or less over, people in Europe (and elsewhere) resumed their pre-Covid way of life as much as possible.

The European consensus is that governments should counter the ecological crisis by introducing stricter norms of emissions, prohibiting damaging substances, promoting public transport, subsidising energy-saving investments, ecological building methods, etc. The European Commission in particular is working hard to implement these kind of measures. But realistically these policies alone will not stop the process of natural deterioration and climate change. For example, while climate change conferences aim to reduce global warming to 1.5 degrees by 2100, experts say this rise will happen in a few years.

A negative message or a challenge to make long term changes?

In response, we cannot escape questioning our affluent way of life. Even in these times of crisis, Europeans are affluent in comparison with a large part of the world, and many aspire to our lifestyle. But our lifestyle is not sustainable.

We hear that we should drastically scale down our demands for energy and material resources. The energy and cost-of-living crises has already compelled the larger part of the population to cut their expenses, to travel less, to downgrade their living standards. In so doing, they are effectively reducing their ecological footprint. But what will we do once inflation is low again and the economy recovers? This depends on how we perceive the current crisis: as a negative setback, which it certainly is for many people, or more than just that, i.e., as a challenge to rethink our mode of living and make long-term changes. Faced with our overdependency on energy, we can now see more than ever the need to bring lifestyle and our economies in line with the ecological imperative of sustainability.

Virtue out of necessity – creation care

I would suggest that we see the current crises as a circumstance we can learn from, and respect and protect the natural environment instead of exhausting and overexploiting it. In Christian terms, this is the virtue – and in fact, the mandate and Biblical command of creation care, i.e., to keep the balance between ‘tilling’ and ‘protecting’ the earth (Genesis 2,15). In other words, keep the balance between exploiting natural resources and protecting nature. This implies that we should develop a simpler life-style, with respect to our material demands. I use the relative word ‘simpler’ as there is not an absolute standard for everyone in this area, rather becoming less consumerist, less demanding on natural resources, less destructive for eco-systems.

Creation-conscious lifestyle, values recovered

Green movements, and Christian environmental groups, have advocated this for decades. We can learn from their research and experience.

For example:

- Systematically ask the question before buying something: do I really need this?
- Prefer collective modes above individualised modes of transport.

- Reduce the number as well as the use of electronic devices.
- Reduce consumption of meat (1 kg of meat costs 7 kg of cereals).
- Choose local food produced without chemicals. As more of us use 'bio' products, greater demand will make them more affordable for many.
- If possible, live close to your workplace, share luxury goods with others who cannot afford them, encourage collective ownership of materials used only occasionally.

Much more could be mentioned. Developing a creation-conscious way of life, in keeping with the cultural mandate in the Bible, helps us to recover immaterial values, such as the importance of 'being' and 'sharing' over and against 'having', to know the peace of mind of being satisfied with what we have, and to rediscover the value of gratitude towards the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

It is interesting to see how today's adherents of a minimalist view of consumption also emphasise these things. Their idea is to live happier by doing more with less. Less furniture, less clothes, less types of food during one meal. Less time in the workplace to have more time for 'other things'. While they often take their inspiration from Asian religious and philosophical notions, the idea in itself is quite compatible with Christian principles.

Comeback of the call for simple lifestyle

All of this sounds strangely familiar to older Christians who have heard the call for a simpler lifestyle that was so prominent in the Evangelical mission movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In those years, Christians were called on to intentionally adopt a modest lifestyle in terms of possessions, consumption, travelling and material comfort, because of three imperatives:

First, the Biblical call for social justice. This implies that the rich share their material goods with the poor. The rich should spend less for themselves and give away more.

Second, the demands of discipleship. Christians are called to follow the example of Jesus, who is not only our Saviour but also holds out a model how we should live as people who are saved by grace. In his teaching, Jesus had much to say about wealth and poverty, material possessions, giving, helping people in need.

Thirdly, the credibility of our Gospel communication. The life of the messengers should be in conformity with the message they bring. In his best-selling *Rich Christians are living in an age of hunger*,³ the influential Evangelical Ronald Sider called on believers in the affluent West to live with much less, because of the just mentioned three imperatives³. More influential still was John Stott, who argued in the same way for a new and radically different way of living. And he practiced what he preached. People who have known him and worked with him were struck, if not impressed, by his simple lifestyle alongside, his generosity towards people in need.⁴

In the last decade, churches and Christian organisations are once again considering 'creation care' to be an integral part of 'missional living' and being a 'missional church'. Creation care implies that we, in our affluent societies, critically examine our modes of consumption and production. In a sense, the call for a simpler lifestyle is back again, but not exactly for the same reasons. Today, the ecological imperative is felt very strongly. This was virtually absent from the Evangelical agenda in the 1960s and 1970s. No conference declaration ever addressed the issue.

The Anglican Church's 'five marks of mission' is a telling example, as it was originally only four:

(1) Proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; (2) Teach, baptise and nurture new believers; (3) Respond to human need by loving service; and (4) Transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence and pursue peace and reconciliation. At a later stage, a fifth mark was

³ Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an age of hunger*, Word Publishing, 1978.

⁴ Cf. Andy Jones, *Why John Stott Lived with Less*. The Gospel Coalition, July 27, 2022.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/stott-live-less/#:~:text=The%20Lausanne%20Covenant%2C%20a%20confessional,to%20both%20relief%20and%20evangelism.%E2%80%9D>

less/#:~:text=The%20Lausanne%20Covenant%2C%20a%20confessional,to%20both%20relief%20and%20evangelism.%E2%80%9D

added: To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, to sustain and renew the life of the earth⁵ This model has won wide acceptance among other Christian traditions. Inversely, the imperative of social justice to combat poverty, which was so strongly put forward a generation ago, does not seem to be a dominant issue today, at least in Europe. Other issues are catching more attention. But there is common ground with respect to discipleship. Today's emphasis is on missional living as a way of being a witness of the Gospel in a largely secularised society, resembles the concern in the 1960s and 1970s that our way of life be consistent with the practical teaching and example of Jesus. In conclusion I would say that the call for simpler lifestyle of a generation ago needs to be heard again, as we are challenged to make virtue out of economic necessity in the light of the ecological imperative. What was written then, can broaden our perspective and deepen our motivation.

SEPARATE ARTICLE OF THE QUOTES FROM DECLARATIONS IN THE PAST

John Stott was the inspirator of the Lausanne Congress of World Evangelisation of 1974 and the drafter of the now famous Lausanne Covenant adopted during that gathering. Article 9 set introduced the theme of simple lifestyle, which would become a major issue in the years to follow. Here is the full text, which reflects the global situation at that time:

9. THE URGENCY OF THE EVANGELISTIC TASK

More than 2,700 million people, which is more than two-thirds of all humanity, have yet to be evangelized. We are ashamed that so many have been neglected; it is a standing rebuke to us and to the whole Church. There is now, however, in many parts of the world, an unprecedented receptivity to the Lord Jesus Christ. We are convinced that this is the time for churches and para-church agencies to pray earnestly for the salvation of the unreached and to launch new efforts to achieve world evangelization. A reduction of foreign missionaries and money in an evangelized country may sometimes be necessary to facilitate the national church's growth in self-reliance and to release resources for unevangelized areas. Missionaries should flow ever more freely from and to all six continents in a spirit of humble service. The goal should be, by all available means and at the earliest possible time, that every person will have the opportunity to hear, to understand, and to receive the good news. We cannot hope to attain this goal without sacrifice. *All of us are shocked by the poverty of millions and disturbed by the injustices which cause it. 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* (our italics).

An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle (1980)

In 1980, the Lausanne Movement that came out of this congress, organised the International Consultation on Simple Lifestyle, which led to the publication of *An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle*.⁶ It was a response to the challenge put forward in the Lausanne Covenant Article 9. The opening phrases set the tone.

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.

⁵ The 'Four Marks of Mission' were first developed by the Anglican Consultative Council in 1984, and then adopted by the 1988 Lambeth Commission of bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion. The fifth mark, creation care, was added in 1990. See <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>

⁶ Lausanne Occasional Paper nr. 20, 1980. See: <https://lausanne.org/content/simple-personal-lifestyle-excerpt>

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 re-examine 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 Consultation was conscious Christian simplicity embraces much more than our economic life-style. It describes an inner attitude of humble joy and peace, by reducing the covetousness which breeds worry and tension (Luke 12:15). This means 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.

Christian obedience demands a simple life-style, irrespective of the needs of others. But the Declaration adds that...

...at the same time, 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.

The Declaration then elaborates in some detail how we can develop a simpler lifestyle. There is not a one size fits all model, because Christians live in different contexts (among the poor, or in affluent cities, in the West or in the East or in the Global South). We should also recognise a diversity of callings. If not, there is the danger of legalism and regimentation, and of becoming judgmental towards others. But for all the variety and differentiation of individual situations, the life-style debate should not become just word and speech rather than actions (1 John 3:18). So it was resolved that generally speaking,

We should 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).