

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY IN THE BIBLE

By W. David Holden

The term “voluntary simplicity” has come into the ethics of Christianity in very recent times. Richard B. Gregg is said to have coined this term in his essay entitled “The Value of Voluntary Simplicity” in 1936.¹ In the 20th and 21st Centuries the practice of voluntary simplicity has rightly become a central virtue for Christians and others for whom social justice and environmental stewardship are vital concerns. The concept and practice of voluntary simplicity, however, are much older. The Mennonites (among whom are the Amish), and the Society of Friends (also known as the Quakers) have made it a central practice of their traditions since the 16th and 17th Centuries. In the form of the practice of voluntary poverty it has been a central tenet of monasticism since the days of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th Century. Voluntary poverty received renewed emphasis in the poverty movements of the Western Church in the late Middle Ages, most notably the asceticism of St. Francis of Assisi.

But is the concept of voluntary simplicity even older? Is it to be found in the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity? Certainly the concept may be inferred from several of the teachings of the Bible. The writers of the Bible clearly taught that human beings are to treat the earth as a garden, and in the past century it has become very clear that the earth will not be a garden for very long if human beings continue to practice unbridled consumerism. The writers of the Bible clearly taught that wealthy people have obligations toward the poor, which clearly implies that the wealthy may not simply accumulate wealth without giving some of it away. The writers of the Bible clearly taught that gluttony, greed, and vainglory are serious obstacles in the relationship of human beings with God, and Jews and Christians have for centuries tackled these vices by the practice of living simply. These vices directly contradict the great Biblical teachings about wealth, which is always a gift to human beings from the boundless riches of God, and trust that the Lord will in fact provide for human beings.² As John D. Roth has said, “Most of the things that clutter our lives are efforts to protect ourselves from being vulnerable in one way or another. A conscious commitment to trusting in God will almost always lead to a life of greater simplicity.”³ But the fact that one or several teachings of the writers of the Bible *imply* a certain concept does not mean that they *actually and explicitly* taught that concept.

When asking about the concepts of the writers of the Bible, students of the sacred text customarily explore the words that they used. This approach begins by looking at the terms “simple” and “simplicity” and the like and see whether they refer to voluntary simplicity in a way similar to the way people use that phrase today. The words “simple” and “simplicity” do in fact occur in English translations of the Bible, but they do not refer to voluntary simplicity in the sense that we have come to understand it in the past century. In the New Revised Standard Version, for example, the English word “simple” translates forms of the Hebrew word *peti* (פֶּתִי).⁴ This word comes from a verb that means “open.” It refers to a person who is open to outside

¹ The author read that Gregg coined the term in the Wikipedia article on Voluntary Simplicity; see wikipedia.com. Gregg’s essay was published by Pendle Hill and is available online at <http://www.pendlehill.org/resources/files/pdf/%20files/php0036.pdf>.

² I am indebted to Professor John D. Roth of Goshen College, a Mennonite school in Goshen, Indiana, who reviewed this paper for me and very kindly noted the themes of wealth and trust in an understanding of voluntary simplicity in the Scriptures.

³ Roth, personal communication, March 20, 2007.

influences, whether for good or for bad. As an illustration of this meaning, Proverbs 14:15 reads, “The simple believe everything, but the clever consider their steps.”⁵ The New Revised Standard Version also has the adverb “simply” in three passages⁶ and the noun phrase “simple-minded” in one,⁷ but never in reference to the virtue of voluntary simplicity.⁸

If the concept of voluntary simplicity is to be found in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, therefore, it is more elusive than finding a word or word-family. If it is to be found, it must be embedded in other teachings. It seems to the writer of this article that it is in fact to be found in three contexts: in the sayings that this writer calls the simplicity proverbs, in connection with teachings about modesty, and in connection with teachings about quietness.

The Simplicity Proverbs

The writers of the Bible taught the concept of voluntary simplicity in several sayings in the wisdom literature that I call the simplicity proverbs. The simplicity proverbs are to be found in the books of Proverbs, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Sirach. (And perhaps elsewhere! I should be grateful to any readers that can direct my attention to other such sayings that I have not listed in this article.) All of these proverbs are in the form of a comparison. All of them state that it is better to live a simple life than to perpetuate some kind of evil. That is to say, all of these sayings wrestle with the relative value of wealth when compared to sin, wrongdoing, or other sources of pain or discomfort in life. The space limitations of this article forbid a thorough discussion of these proverbs, so I provide four of them here for illustrative purposes.⁹

⁴ This Hebrew word with this English translation is found in Psalm 19:7 (= 19:8 in the Hebrew Bible [the form of the Hebrew Bible actually used in Jewish synagogues is known as the Masoretic Text, so all subsequent references to the Hebrew Bible in this paper will be noted with the abbreviation MT]); 116:6; 119:30; Proverbs 1:4; 1:22; 1:32; 7:7; 8:5; 9:4; 9:16; 14:15; 14:18; 19:25; 21:11; 22:3; and 27:12. The English word “simple” is also used to translate the Hebrew word *poth* (פֹּתֵה) in Job 5:2. This word is a participle, derived from a verb that is itself derived from the adjective *peti*.

⁵ In Proverbs 9:6 the same Hebrew adjective is translated “immaturity” and in Ezekiel 45:20 it is translated “ignorance.” In both cases the English cases the part of speech from adjective to noun. These and the occurrences cited in the foregoing footnote are all the occasions in which this precise term is found in the Hebrew Bible. There are, however, similar terms that occur in several other passages and are translated by other English words.

⁶ Wisdom 16:27; I Maccabees 5:48; and Colossians 2:22.

⁷ Romans 16:18.

⁸ All the references in this paragraph refer to the way the New Revised Standard Version translates the Hebrew text. Other translations deal with the Hebrew text in different ways. The Latin Vulgate, for instance, uses the term *simplicitas* in some passages with a meaning that comes close to the concept of voluntary simplicity. For example, Proverbs 19:1 is rendered: *Melior est pauper qui ambulat in simplicitate sua quam torquens labia insipiens*. The Latin here means the same thing as the contemporary English versions (the New Revised Standard Version reads, “Better the poor walking in integrity than one perverse of speech who is a fool”), but the Latin uses the word *simplicitas* to mean “integrity.” The translators of the King James Version knew their Latin very well, and sometimes they also used the terms “simple” or “simplicity” in ways that come close to prescribing simple living as a moral virtue (see II Samuel 5:11; Romans 12:8; Romans 16:19; and II Corinthians 1:12). Nonetheless, these passages merely approach the virtue; they do not actually command it.

⁹ A complete discussion would look at the literary form of the comparison used in the Book of Proverbs and elsewhere in Scripture. In Hebrew a comparison is ordinarily made by the use of the adjective meaning “good” (*tov*, טוֹב) and the first term of the comparison, followed by the word “from” (*min*, מִן) and the second term of the comparison. So the sentence literally reads, “Good is this from that.” This literary form is found in the Book of Proverbs in 21 passages: 3:14; 8:11; 8:19; 12:9; 15:16; 15:17; 16:8; 16:16; 16:19; 16:32; 17:1; 19:1; 19:22; 21:9; 21:19; 22:1; 25:7; 25:24; 27:5; 27:10; 28:6. The majority of these passages seem to this writer to have some bearing on the matter of voluntary simplicity, but the following do not so appear: 21:9; 21:19; 25:7; 25:24; 27:5; 27:10.

Proverbs 15:16: “Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it.” The fear of the Lord is, as Scripture says several times, the beginning of wisdom. The “trouble” referred to here is of a very particular kind. The Hebrew word is *mehumah* (מְהוּמָה), which refers to a tumult or uproar. The meaning here is perhaps indicated by Amos 3:9-10,¹⁰ which reads:

Proclaim to the strongholds of Ashdod,
and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt,
and say, “Assemble yourselves on Mount Samaria,
and see what great tumults are within it,
and what great oppressions are in its midst.”
They do not know how to do right, says the Lord,
Those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.

The point of the proverb is that obeying the divine commands to do justice to others may require one to lead a very simple life.

Proverbs 17:1: “Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.” The second half of this proverb has been paraphrased in the New Revised Standard Version. The Hebrew literally says, “than a house full of the sacrifices of strife.” To understand this half-verse, one must remember that the ancient Israelites ate very little meat—very much unlike many moderns. Livestock were more important for wool, milk, and work than they were for meat. To kill one’s livestock was very unthrifty; one would do so only for very good reasons. One such good reason to kill an animal was as an act of worship. When an animal was offered in sacrifice, the person who offered it usually ate it. Therefore, a house full of sacrifices would in fact be a house full of feasting on choice food. But strife (*riv*, רִיב), especially when strife is a legal dispute, as the term can mean in Hebrew, ruins any feast. The proverb means that a very simple meal, the merest mouthful of dry bread, when accompanied by some prosperity and peace and quiet, is to be preferred over delicacies with conflicts and legal disputes.

Psalms 37:16: “Better is a little that the righteous person has than the abundance of many wicked.” (This verse is Psalm 36:16 in the ancient translation into Greek, known as the Septuagint, which is the standard version used in the Eastern churches.) The word for “wicked” (*reshaim*, רֶשָׁעִים) might be translated “cruel.” The proverb means that if a person obedient to God owns only a little bit, it is to be preferred to the wealth of many people who oppress others.

Ecclesiastes 4:6: “Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after wind.” The writer of Ecclesiastes is often referred to simply as the Preacher or the Teacher. His view of life was not very positive. He seems to have thought that all work is as meaningless as a child’s game of chasing after the wind. He said, “I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person’s envy of another.”¹¹ Perhaps he overstated his case. But to the extent that envy does motivate someone to work, the Preacher’s next observation is certainly true: “This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.” The toil to which the Preacher here refers is meaningless, pointless work. In this proverb the Septuagint is somewhat more literal in its understanding of the Hebrew than is the English. The Septuagint reads, “Better is a handful of rest than two handfuls of trouble and waywardness of spirit.” However exactly the proverb

¹⁰ I owe this cross reference and other insights into these proverbs to the commentary by A. Cohen, *Proverbs*, rev. edn. (New York: Soncino Press, 1985).

¹¹ This is from the verses immediately preceding the proverb under discussion, in Ecclesiastes 4:4.

should be rendered, the meaning of the saying is that it would be better to have a single handful of anything than twice that much gained from a meaningless task.

Modesty

The terms “modest” and “modesty” are rare in Scripture. They are not used in the New Revised Standard Version in its translation of the Hebrew Bible. The terms are used, however, to translate Greek terms in the books that Protestants call the Apocrypha and in the New Testament.¹² Four Greek terms lie behind the English word, all of which may be translated with other English terms. *Aidos* (ἄιδώς) in I Timothy 2:9 is a sense of shame; the cognate verb *aideomai* (ἰδέομαι) in II Maccabees 15:12 and IV Maccabees 8:3 means “to be ashamed to do something” or “to stand in awe, fear, or respect of someone.” These terms are used of both men and women: Paul in his letter to Timothy refers to the modesty of women, while the writers of the Books of Maccabees refer to the modesty of men. Another Greek term is *aischynteros* (ἰσχυντηρός), which in Sirach 26:15 and 32:10 is an adjective meaning “bashful.” Also in Sirach (in 26:24) is the term *euschemon* (ἑυσχημων) which means “elegant in figure,” “graceful,” or “becoming.” St. Paul uses the term for the great virtue of temperance, *sophrosyne* (σωφροσύνη) with the meaning of modesty in I Timothy 2:15.¹³

As noted in the introductory paragraphs of this article, the concept of voluntary simplicity can clearly be derived from other teachings in the Scriptures. In the case of the teaching on modesty, however, St. Paul realized these implications himself. St. Paul wrote to Timothy, “Women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes” (I Timothy 2:9). The logic here is: If you are going to practice the virtue of modesty, then you must to some degree practice the virtue of voluntary simplicity. St. Peter gave a very similar instruction, but without referring directly to modesty. St. Peter, addressing the women in his churches, wrote, “Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight” (I Peter 3:3-4). The logic here is: If you wish to have a quiet and gentle spirit, then you must to some degree practice the virtue of voluntary simplicity.

These verses, especially when combined with St. Paul’s teaching about the length of hair that is appropriate to the two sexes and to the propriety of a head covering for women (see I Corinthians 11:3-16), have led to long and old controversies about how men and women should dress at corporate worship and at other times. Some Christian traditions have been very strict, insisting that women should never cut their hair, never do anything with it other than wash and comb it, and never wear any kind of jewelry or make-up. Other traditions have been not quite so strict as that, but have still taught that sexual and gender differences should be mirrored in dress and grooming. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore these questions in detail. It is within the scope of this article, however, to stress that such discussions are not totally without merit and are not merely relics of the ancient world. Modesty for both men and women is connected with the practice of voluntary simplicity. However cultures may differ on the details of modesty, appropriate display of sexual and gender differences, and the like, the practice of

¹² Those passages are Sirach 26:15; 26:24; and 32:10; II Maccabees 15:12; III Maccabees 1:19; IV Maccabees 8:3; and I Timothy 2:9 and 2:15.

¹³ The only use of the word “modest” in the King James Version is in the same context in I Timothy, but the English term is used to translate the word *kosmios* (κόσμιος), which means “orderly” or “becoming,” in 2:9.

voluntary simplicity as it is understood by the Apostles will be expressed in these things as in other aspects of ordinary daily life.

Quietness

The foregoing section of this article noted that St. Paul drew out the implication of voluntary simplicity from the virtue of modesty. It so happens, however, that the reverse of this logic also occurs in the Scriptures. All of the simplicity proverbs that this article has noted and St. Peter's instruction regarding women's dress connect the virtue of living *simply* with the virtue of living *quietly*.

Proverbs 15:16 reads, "Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it." As already noted, the "trouble" referred to here is a "tumult" or "uproar."

Proverbs 17:1 says, "Better is a dry morsel *with quiet* than a house full of feasting with strife." The word translated "quiet" is not common in the Hebrew Bible. The word is *shalvah* (שָׁלוֹחַ) and it refers to being in a state of quiet, abundance, prosperity, or peace. The Septuagint reads, "Better is a morsel with pleasure in peace [*meth' hedones en eirene*, μεθ' ἡδονῆς¹⁴ ἐν εἰρήνῃ]." The term in the Septuagint (and the concept in the Hebrew text) connects voluntary simplicity with peace and peacemaking, one of the central concepts of the theology and ethics of the entire Bible.

Psalms 37:16 says, "Better is a little that the righteous person has than the *abundance* of many wicked." *Hamon* (חֲמֹן) is the Hebrew word translated "abundance." The word also means "sound," "murmur," "rush," or "roar." It suggests loud and ostentatious wealth.

Ecclesiastes 4:6 directly compares quietness with trouble and futility when the Preacher says, "Better is a handful *with quiet* than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after wind." The Preacher uses the Hebrew term *nachat* (נָחַת); it is more often translated "rest" than quiet. This noun is related to the verb *nuach* (נָחַ), which the Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:11) uses of the rest of the Lord after creating the world. The Septuagint translates that Hebrew word in Ecclesiastes with the Greek word *anapausis* (ἀνάπαυσις), which is ordinarily translated "rest" in English. In the Fourth Commandment the Septuagint uses a similar Greek term, *katapauo* (καταπαύω). The Greek term in Ecclesiastes is also used in the great invitation of the Lord Jesus: "Come to Me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). The Preacher's proverb connects voluntary simplicity with the Sabbath, itself a foretaste of the Kingdom yet to come.

St. Peter, in his teaching on the dress appropriate to women, says that women should seek "the lasting beauty of a gentle and *quiet spirit*" (I Peter 3:4). The word translated "quiet" is the adjective *hesychios* (ἡσυχίος). St. Paul used the verb related to this adjective when he said, "Aspire to live *quietly*, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your own hands" (I Thessalonians 4:11). In other passages of the New Testament the English versions translate it and its cognates not only with the term "quiet," but also with the terms "cease," "hold one's peace," "rest," "silence," and "peaceable."¹⁵ This term is especially beloved to Orthodox Christians. They have developed a profound system of prayer and ascetic practice around the

¹⁴ My apologies to those who read Greek with traditional accents. I could not find a way to insert the circumflex accent over the η in this word with my computer programs.

¹⁵ The other passages in the New Testament that use words of this family are Luke 14:4 and 23:56; Acts 11:18, 21:14, and 22:2; II Thessalonians 3:12; I Timothy 2:2, 11, and 12. The words in this family are common in the Septuagint.

cultivation of this kind of quietness. Whether he intended to do so or not, St. Peter has connected simple living with the deepest and richest spirituality.

Living quietly and living simply are not, strictly and logically speaking, the same thing. It is possible for a person to live simply, but also very much in the public eye. But the passages under consideration seem to teach that this is not ordinarily the case. Ordinarily people who seek to live simply will also seek to live quietly, out of the view of the public and the powerful.¹⁶ Voluntary simplicity is therefore not only about avoiding sin and wrongdoing and expressing solidarity with the poor even in the teachings of the writers of the Bible. It is a way to embody peace and peacemaking, to anticipate the Sabbath rest of the coming Reign of God over the world, and a way to practice the deep silence of attentive listening to God.

Conclusion

No single word or phrase in the Bible teaches the concept of voluntary simplicity. Concepts are not always designated, however, by single words or phrases. Sometimes people hold to a concept without using these linguistic conveniences. Voluntary simplicity is such a concept. Voluntary simplicity is taught in some of the proverbs and in connection with the concept of modesty. Furthermore, when the concept of voluntary simplicity is presented in the Bible, it is often connected with the concept of quietness, which itself has connections with the great Biblical themes of peace, Sabbath, and silence before God. In this light, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that while voluntary poverty may be a special calling, a way of life that only a few people are to follow, voluntary simplicity is a universal obligation for those who already live prosperously. The bumper-sticker slogan “Live simply, that others may simply live” and other modern sayings like it are not merely worthy sentiments. Living simply, from the point of view of the writers of the Bible, is an ethical obligation of a very high order. It is one of the great tasks of contemporary theology and ethics to help people learn to live simply in their many different contexts and with the great variety of wealth and need in the present age.

¹⁶ It is significant in light of both their long history of persecution and the great value that they place on voluntary simplicity that the Mennonites have often described themselves as “the quiet in the land,” a phrase drawn from Psalm 35:20. It is regrettable that this image in the Hebrew Bible and the traditional English versions is completely lacking in the Septuagint’s rendering of this verse (which it numbers as 34:20).