

Beware of Simplifying

Donald S. Whitney

Although I have written a book with the title *Simplify Your Spiritual Life*, I urge you to beware of simplifying.

If I had to pick a theme verse for the book I'd choose 2 Corinthians 11:3, where the apostle Paul says, "But I am afraid, that as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (NASB). What Paul feared for his readers in Corinth still happens today. One of the ways it could happen to some who read this book might surprise you. To say it the way Paul put it, "I am afraid that your minds will be led astray *by simplicity* from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ."

There's a kind of cult of simplicity today, and no wonder. While life has always been hard, never has it been more hectic and complicated than now. As Richard A. Swenson reminds us in *Margin and The Overload Syndrome*, the result of "progress" in technology and the economy is the production of more and more of everything faster and faster. Inevitably, though, the rapid accumulation of it all—including even many of the good things in life, such as the ability to travel or communicate ever quicker—begins to overwhelm us. As our physical, emotional, relational, financial, and spiritual reserves become depleted, we desperately search for relief. Simplifying our lives sounds like the answer. Consequently, the "simplicity movement" gains momentum every day. Books, magazines, websites, newsletters, retreats, conferences, courses, study groups, and communities devoted to simplicity multiply daily.

Beware, however, when simplifying begins to overgrow its purpose. Instead of serving the spiritual life, simplifying can gradually take over as master. For some, simplifying no longer assists their spiritual life; it *is* their spiritual life. Models of a

simple lifestyle like Henry David Thoreau become their messiah, and books like *Walden* their Bible.

Just like any other passion or pursuit, simplifying can become an idol. It takes thought and energy to simplify, and it's easy for it to start siphoning some of our devotion to Christ. With all its benefits, simplifying has the deceptive potential to make us even more materialistic, earth-bound, and self-centered. That's because those most serious about simplifying never stop evaluating what things they need and what things they can live without, or thinking about ways to save money and get things cheaper.

I've read—and profited from—a bit of the literature of the simplicity movement. There's much good there. Don't forget, however, what simplifying cannot do. Simplifying your life cannot save your soul. Some people's zealous efforts to simplify are nothing more than a well-intentioned violation of Jesus' words in Matthew 16:25, "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it." To paraphrase the next verse, "For what profit is it to a man if he [simplifies] the whole world, and loses his own soul?"

Simplify wherever needed; but beware of being led astray *by simplicity* from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.

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