This paper follows a consultation on Lifestyle in 2003 by JRI Associates and Oxford SAGE. It looks at the personal issues raised by the global environmental crisis, and is best read in conjunction with other JRI Briefing Papers.

The word ‘Lifestyle’ today has distinct connotations of affluence. It is connected with having enough money, beyond the necessities, to make your life what you want it, or even to give it a certain appearance to others. Lifestyle is exemplified by the modern kitchen, which is not so much a room as a concept, styled in every component to create a certain effect. A ‘farmhouse’ or ‘Shaker’ design will evoke the settled existence of communities long established in one place, whereas the modern family is constantly uprooted. Much money will be paid to try to overcome this feeling of transience. To home improvements one could add the search for perfect holiday destinations. Often these will be to places where a similar sense of rootedness can be found; old communities with vestiges of a quieter, pre-modern existence. However when we travel, we expect to stay within the bubble of modernity: we like the images, but only tolerate limited inconvenience.

The good life and the environmental crisis
‘Lifestyle’ is therefore a combination of practicality and symbols that carry meaning. It is sustained by powerful advertising, and has no real boundaries, except that ‘enough’ is always slightly more than we already have. But into this understanding of what is ‘good’ has come first the rumour, then the roar, of the environmental crisis. Suddenly what appears to be ‘good’ becomes questionable.

We can put ourselves in the shoes of the slave-owners of the Southern States of the USA, whose Christian consciences were somehow at ease with the means by which their lifestyle was sustained, or the Christian South Africans who supported the inequities of apartheid. Today we are learning that our ‘right’ to private transport and cheap air travel, and much of the way we live as consumers, is a prosperity gained at the expense of others, now and in the future. Over-consumption uses up the physical capital of the world, reduces biodiversity, and damages the living-space of people, animals and plants, especially through the effects of global warming, such as floods and droughts. Unless we change, we are destined to pass on to our children better gadgets, but a poorer, uglier and less fruitful world.

As this realisation dawns, it creates ethical dilemmas. Our western lifestyle is not so easily adjusted. Family members are dispersed far and wide, and car and air travel bring them together. How do we balance family and global priorities? The goods in our shops have often been transported thousands of miles, at an environmental cost which we, in Britain, may well not bear. But the supermarket flowers flown from Kenya have brought a friend much joy. Was that a godly gift or a moment of consumer weakness?

Added to environmental awareness is the horror, from which we are still largely insulated, of world poverty. Suddenly we find that our ‘good’ is someone else’s harm. Economically this is not easy to understand. We pay for goods and food from every corner of the world. But this transfer of wealth from my pocket, I learn, does not reach the pocket of the family that produces what I use and eat. Normally we consider a transaction completed when we have paid for goods. Now we find that to be involved with trade at all has involved us in a global responsibility.

Conscience, and coping with it
How do people of conscience respond to a situation in which everything they think of as ‘good’– affluence, travel, and cheap food and goods— is revealed to be ‘harmful’, hurting present generations of people as well as scarring the earth and destroying God’s creatures? It seems to me that there are three strategies we tend to adopt, in various parts of our lives.

The first strategy is some measure of withdrawal from modern life. If we do less and spend less, our total negative impact on the environment will be less. But any hermit-like dissociation from the world also carries a cost, which is likely to be lack of participation in movements and events. Social life, influence and action almost invariably require meetings and travel. In the need to conserve fuel, almost anybody, and certainly any political leader, can consider himself an exception.

The second strategy is to adopt a ‘virtuous lifestyle’. Here the emphasis is on positive action: recycling, use of public transport, reduced energy use at home, fuel-efficient cars, etc. and of course buying Fair Trade goods. These, combined with campaigning, are making a difference. Nonetheless, there is likely to be even in virtuous lives a hinterland of compromise. As social beings we are involved in practices and institutions not of our making. For example, the British food system accounts for 30-40% of all road freight, not to mention the 24,000 km of air travel that may be represented on a typical plate of food, but it is still not easy to buy locally produced food.

The third, and perhaps most popular strategy, is to live the modern lifestyle modestly and guiltily. What we can do to
live with ecological restraint we do, and what we cannot, we feel guilty about.

The Christian dilemma

If we are Christians, the failure of any of these strategies to fully satisfy leaves us with a dilemma. As biblical people, we understand that we have a responsibility to tend, that is, to positively benefit the creation. As informed people, we discover that the very lifestyle that sustains us is doing more harm than good, and degradation is happening faster than any possible repair. We are responsible in a negative sense for what is happening to the creation.

So on the one hand we want to be virtuous. But on the other, ‘doing our bit’ hardly compensates, it would seem, for the negative effects of our life and consumption (a rough estimate of one’s personal ecological footprint can be made on www.ecofoot.org). The suspicion grows that our Christian faith is demanding the impossible.

‘Does God understand?’

This is the point at which we find ourselves asking whether Christian faith has something distinctive to contribute to the lifestyle question. If it is there only to give us a keener conscience, and to provide a sense of guilt we would never have known without it, then many of us might prefer to try something else! Repentance and forgiveness, in the New Testament, assume a turning away from sin, but in this case, because of our involvement in the larger sins of society, we seem frustratingly powerless to do so. But has Christ called us to a life of failure, guilt, and impossible demands? If not, does he know what sort of world we have been called into?

To ask this sort of question at first seems improper or irrelevant. But we need to be this honest with ourselves to start to probe the deeper layers of Christian truth. We are so constantly surrounded by secular ethical demands that we are tempted to reduce Christianity to an ethical religion (dugged by ethical failure), and not to find in it the real resources it has for the practical dilemmas of modern living.

So the question of ‘what sort of a world we have been called into?’ is foundational, and it yields some surprising answers.

Saving the planet: our task?

In the first place, the Bible tells us that the world, the cosmos, was created by God. We are creatures. This shows us that it is our position to follow along, to try to understand. Understanding is a process, but not entirely a scientific process. There are some things we have only just learnt scientifically, which we perhaps ought first to have learnt morally, such as the effects of carelessness, waste and greed. One of the main things we learn is that we are not God. The Bible shows us that actions have consequences, and that the total effects of human wrongdoing are beyond our power to put right. The notion that we are here to ‘save the planet’, when we are the very beings responsible for its present state, seems somewhat ludicrous. And yet, to put things right is what we are called to do. So both the troubles of the earth, and our weakness in trying to fix them, should rightly point us to Jesus. There is a Saviour, of ourselves and of ‘the planet’, whom we meet at the point of our extremity, personal and ecological.

Born to rule

The early chapters of the Bible also give us another distinguishing characteristic of being human. We were born to rule. We were made in God’s image, with the ability and calling to decide on earth how things shall be. There is godly and childish, selfish ruling, and however sinful we have been, that position and calling has not changed. The choice has been ours, all along, whether to use the resources of the earth with delight, gratitude, and pleasure, or to squander, waste and ruin them. It is not a high view of human responsibility to use what we can get away with. The highest view, focused in Jesus ‘the second Adam’, is to have a wise care for creation.

But is there enough?

The question often arises: in God’s world, is there really enough? Is it not the case that if everyone in Africa, India and China were to have the same standard of living as we have here, then food, raw materials, energy, and water would run short? (It has been calculated that if everyone in China was to eat fish like Americans, the whole seas would have to be scoured and emptied.) This fear is sometimes mounted as an implicit accusation against the God of the Bible. Thus it would appear that God’s provision is sufficient for a primitive rural lifestyle, but that the gospel here shows itself too old-fashioned for the modern world.

In fact, there is much in the gospel that is startlingly relevant to the lifestyle issue. God has given many indications in the Bible that it is in his nature to give abundantly. But does that mean that ‘the American way of life’, of having anything that appeals to us, whenever we feel like it, is his plan for every human being? That hardly seems compatible, either with a finite world (even one with many undiscovered potentialities), or with the real nature of his love. In fact, he has shown us that our own self-love, and the way we attempt to satisfy it, is completely misplaced. The material is not the end of life, but a sign (of his love), which can easily become an idol. So on the one hand we have a Creator who delights to give materially. On the other, he has made us guardians of an
Two doors: worship...

In terms of human lifestyle, and in accordance with the Bible’s main themes, we could picture two doors, one marked ‘worship’, and the other ‘idolatry’. Through the ‘worship’ door we find ourselves in a world immensely beautiful and biodiverse. We can never have enough of looking at it, and studying it; it is so vast and varied it never tires us, and its inter-relationships are so profound we treat it with awe and respect. Constantly we want to give thanks and praise to its and our Maker. He has abundantly supplied our need through this world, which can be tended to supply a surplus. We do not have enormous needs to own things ourselves, since we are satisfied with what we have, and particularly with God’s own presence, which supplies our need for identity and significance. We do however employ some of the materials of the world in creative works, which express our joy and newfound understanding of the world and of our place in it.

…and idolatry

Through the door marked ‘idolatry’ we enter a world where there is never enough. Each one of us feels a gnawing void at the centre, where we have no real place or significance, and so we compete with each other to become established in the land, as self-sufficient ‘images’. Instead of being ‘images of God’, pointing to him, we try to be images of ourselves, as solid as we can, by accruing more and more. Being so unsure of our own place in God’s world, we try to strengthen our weak image by imitation, by lifestyle, by brands, titles and possessions. Because we are in competition, the land is laid waste between us, and we treat everything in the earth as a tool in our purposes. No landscape, bird or animal is safe from our use in the quest for identity. By the time we have finished, we have acquired the whole earth, but in it there is little left to admire, and still less that brings God much glory.

From covetousness to satisfaction

In the New Testament, idolatry is identified with covetousness (Colossians 3:5). Not all lifestyle excess is attributable to covetousness. Much of it is to do with waste, as well as to do with conspicuous consumption and display. But the New Testament’s understanding of covetousness does bring us to the heart of the issue, which is satisfaction. The call is not to ‘spend less’ or to fear covetousness, but to be satisfied with God, and to live at home in God’s world. When God rested on the seventh day, as Genesis tells us, it was as a sign of satisfaction, of a work done so that it might be enjoyed.

Jesus and the apostles modelled a simple lifestyle, not to deny life, but to enjoy it free from the anxieties of ceaseless striving and acquisition. ‘Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world and we cannot take anything out of the world’ (1 Timothy 6:6). The woman who bathed Christ’s feet in precious perfume had perhaps been hoarding it as a precious possession. But the time came for her to move out from ownership to relationship and love (see Luke 19:12 ff). By contrast the ‘rich young ruler’ barricaded himself in on his island of possessions (Matthew 19:6 ff). He could not move out from them to receive Jesus, whose kingdom is ‘the pearl of great price’, worth all we own.

Conclusions: attitudes and practicalities

So how does a focus on Christ and his kingdom help us in the practical dilemmas we face from day to day? First of all, there is our attitude of hope. We do not start out with an impossible mountain of ethical obligations; meeting a depleted world with a defeated mentality. Christian lifestyle begins with the knowledge that we cannot fix the world. Only the returning Christ is able to do that. He has the plans, and he has the means.

But far from leaving us to wait passively until the returning master fixes the mess, Christ has called us to grow up into the responsibility he has modelled. Jesus showed his restoration of the lost authority of Adam, stilling a dangerous storm, and ‘companionship’ with wild animals (Mark 1:13), and he has formed a people to be this new kind of authority in the world, which the creation, in its unhappy, disordered state, is almost begging us to take up. (Romans 8:19 ‘For the Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.’). For the time being, as Hebrews says, the authority of men and women in creation has not been realised: ‘At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him’, that is, man, (Hebrews 2:8), but we see the direction in which he is intended to go when we see Jesus (verse 9).

So our position until the fullness of time is that Christ has selected us, despite ourselves, as a new kind of governor participating in his rule of a new earth, and that for the present we are learners (‘disciples’), practicing what we are taught. So we start as students of kingdom practice, learning from the master.

The master does not teach us rules, by and large, because rules create a mentality either of illusory self-satisfaction or of looking for loopholes. But he does teach us principles, by which we can live in freedom.

Five of these principles are to do with ‘care’, ‘use’, ‘appreciation’, ‘relationship’ and ‘wisdom’.

1. Care for creation.

It was never intended that human activities should use up all the space in the world, leaving no room for plants, birds and animals, and it is only now being fully appreciated that the world is a whole, in which all life plays its part. Since human life has such huge consequences for the species, positive management is essential, and a true part of our calling. That does not mean that some well-meaning actions do not have unintended consequences, and there is still much to learn. Personally we can support wildlife charities or get practically involved in conservation, and for many a first step will be feeding the birds in our gardens.

2. Use, not waste.

There is a particular, and almost blasphemous vanity in buying objects with the purpose of discarding them. The first ‘disposable’ object for sale was invented by Mr Gillette in the 1880s, and the mentality of disposing goods that are essentially sound, to landfill, has been with us ever since. It is very often unavoidable (unless we are always to take our own mug to conferences!) but our sense of respect towards God’s gift of the earth should be repelled by it. Excessive packaging should, if possible, be resisted. Pre-packaged meals create huge waste, as does the disposable nappy (thought to be 3-4% of household waste). If there is to be a retreat from these, it
means a challenge, and possibly a Christian challenge, to the ‘two working parents in a rush’ modern lifestyle. Some of those beautiful kitchens are going to have to be used!

Good, thankful use, however, of what is there to be used, can be a great blessing. The pleasure we get from a well-prepared meal, or from using a good tool, or seeing good clothing, seems God-honouring.

Asking for a lift, or to borrow a tool, creates an unwelcome sense of dependency. However, as well as saving resources, it means some lateral thinking about pleasure that is not as restlessly dependent on mobility (people used to walk, write and read!). In technology, we need courage to adapt to the many new possibilities available. The opportunities to reduce carbon emissions are now many, from ‘Green electricity’, greater insulation, and solar heaters to more energy-efficient products. Inevitably pioneers will pay more than those who wait until a technology becomes cheap, but money, we must remember, is a means, not an end. Car use has serious consequences, particularly as we contemplate the imitation of our habits by India and China. Instead of carrying on blindly with ‘the right to private transport’, we need to think of alternatives. Meanwhile, owning hybrid cars for town driving, or using biofuels in diesel cars, will be changes some people can make. Even to drive more patiently, and less frequently, is a step in the right direction. When we drive, or fly, we should at the least consider a God-given gift is being used for a God-ordained purpose. Otherwise, why go at all?


Our current generation of energy puts seven billion tons of carbon a year into the atmosphere. Taking real responsibility for the consequences could, and needs to, bring in a new era of innovation in lifestyle and technology. In lifestyle, this means a more orderly thinking about pleasure that is not as restlessly dependent on mobility (people used to walk, write and read!). In technology, we need courage to adapt to the many new possibilities available. The opportunities to reduce carbon emissions are now many, from ‘Green electricity’, greater insulation, and solar heaters to more energy-efficient products. Inevitably pioneers will pay more than those who wait until a technology becomes cheap, but money, we must remember, is a means, not an end. Car use has serious consequences, particularly as we contemplate the imitation of our habits by India and China. Instead of carrying on blindly with ‘the right to private transport’, we need to think of alternatives. Meanwhile, owning hybrid cars for town driving, or using biofuels in diesel cars, will be changes some people can make. Even to drive more patiently, and less frequently, is a step in the right direction. When we drive, or fly, we should at the least consider a God-given gift is being used for a God-ordained purpose. Otherwise, why go at all?

Summary

In conclusion, the Christian way is not to live in guilt, and certainly not to aim at minimal existence as the final virtue. On the contrary, it is to come into a full sense that, meant as we are to live here, we have a job to do. Living in deep appreciation of what we have been given, we aim at use not abuse, but above all with an eye to benefit the whole. Success in this present age will be partial, but working in the right direction will help our neighbour now, and our fellow creatures. The consumerist lifestyle has to be challenged. But if we follow Christ, we should be more satisfied in the world, and with the world. This will make ‘less’ go further, because we value its true cost, and enjoy more of its true meaning.