

Art Simon's book on American Affluence, a Review

Colleagues,

Art Simon attended Concordia Seminary the same time as I did (50 yrs ago). He had chutzpah then already. Example: he once recruited a bunch of us seminarians on Saturdays to go across the Mississippi River and head for nearby Troy, Illinois, to get involved in politics. Yes! To wit, to do door to door campaigning for his older brother Paul Simon on Paul's first ever venture into American politics. Paul won that election (for the Illinois state legislature) and began his move up the ladder to many terms in the US Senate. He was an explicitly Lutheran voice in US politics for decades. Paul and Art's parents had served as Lutheran missionaries to China. Some of that parental mindset clearly rubbed off on both sons. Art moved into pastoring but never left politics. He never unlearned Lutheran theology's axiom that "care and redemption"—politics and proclamation—were every Christian's calling. When Jesus said on Easter evening, "as the Father sent me, so send I you," he was saying just that. Brother Paul was also an articulate voice—maybe even superstar—in exercising such a vocation in American politics. Art was not far behind—as this book shows.

Reviewer Jim Roos here in St. Louis, also a Concordia graduate shortly after Art, got bit by the same bug of God's ambidextrous left-hand/right-hand operations in our one world. Because of that I'm happy that he agreed to review Art's book.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

Art Simon. *How Much Is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture.*

(Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Books, 2003)

192 pp, paperback. Price: US\$11.99

Art Simon describes how little one's happiness, joy, or satisfaction increases after basic needs for food shelter, and clothing are met. Art shows how the pursuit of riches, pleasure, and power, beyond basic needs, is addictive and destructive to one's self and to those in need. Living SIMPLY is good in itself. Art shows that living simply and lobbying our government for programs to reduce world hunger is much more effective. Finally, we do this best when our efforts are rooted in thankfulness for Christ's love.

Of the quotes on the cover of this book, my favorite is the one by Richard John Neuhaus, "Art Simon invites us to a new way of living that, freed from the shackles of consumption, is the way of gratitude and generosity. And he leaves it up to each of us to think through and pray through, exactly what that means for us."

Given the substance of the Christian faith that so many of us profess, how do we connect that faith, personal lives, and the global community? How do we fight the shackles of consumerism and the brutality of free enterprise capitalism, which, left to itself, would ruin the environment and let people starve & leave us empty? Art himself was bugged by that dilemma 30 years ago when he founded Bread for the World. One effective way is by active membership in Bread for the World.

Art describes the poverty of riches, the sorrow of pleasure, the weakness of power. Each can be like drugs, which have to be

maintained or increased, and about which we are anxious. Each can become our master rather than our servant. When such happens, the casualties are our trust in God & compassion for our neighbor. We also end with an empty life for our self.

This drive for riches and power can be corporate as well as individual. In St. Louis, Mo. I run a housing ministry to lower income families. In 2003-04, developers to whom the city of St. Louis gave eminent-domain power took and demolished 24 buildings/60 units of good, lower cost housing held by our housing ministry. We received far less than what it will cost to replace the units. On our land they built single-family homes that sell for \$129,000 to \$300,000. Neither our ministry nor our tenants can afford the new housing. A mixture of rich and powerful, public and private, entities conspired to take or benefit from resources which were used by the poor.

After our 24 properties were taken, we had more cash than ever before. I realized a temptation to make decisions based partly on how well they protected our new assets rather than entirely on how well people were served.

Not just this reviewer, but all of us in affluent America face these temptations. Do riches, pleasure, and power increase our happiness? Art's book and our own experience say, "Not at all," once we have basic shelter, clothing, and food. They give momentary highs but not happiness.

Satisfaction with simple living and service is related to our love and faith:

Richard Foster: "The Christian life comes not by gritting our teeth but by falling in love." The Bible shows God's love for us, giving us both the way to heaven and purpose for our earthly life. God's love is as lavish as that of the father to the prodigal son.

Mother Theresa said, "Pray for me that I not loosen my grip on the hand of Jesus even under the guise of ministering to the poor."

Peter Krewet, a supporter of my ministry, once said I needed prayer more than a loan, and then helped with both. "We are not fully engaged in loving others if we tend to their physical needs & ignore their need for God."

"Sabbath Wisdom" is Art's expression for the wisdom of resting. Give yourself (and the world) a break. Retreat, rest, gain perspective, celebrate in a quiet way over the beauty of creation and in simple pleasures such as walking, playing, and spending time with friends, and then revel in healing the world physically and spiritually. Matt 6:33: Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you.

Living simply is beneficial to ourselves but inadequate in ministering to the masses. An effective way to minister to the masses is through lobbying our elected officials. In our democratic society, we must refute "the pretense of weakness." We are power-full. By our letters and phone calls to elected officials, we can improve the lives of millions. That is the purpose of the lobbying organization, "Bread For The World," which Art formed.

For me, HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH is powerful because it shows the nature and relationship of spiritual roots and effective ministry to the poor. I also was moved by Art's explanation of Sabbath Wisdom and the need to incorporate such in my life.

*Jim Roos,
Easter, 2005*