

Breathe

Less stuff, more life

Update 11: Winter 2008

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Credit-Crunched Christmas (Again)

Finding Hope in the midst of the gloom

A year ago in our Christmas update, we led with an article by Chris Webster on 'Credit-Crunch Christmas.' I'm not sure which is stronger, the feeling of 'deja-vu' or the feeling that says, 'We told you so.' Either way we still take no delight in an economic downturn so this year we want to look for signs of hope.

Hope is in short supply at the moment as the nation rides the waves of bad economic news: rising unemployment, falling sales, rising national debt, falling currency, rising repossessions, falling interest rates. As a nation we're experiencing economic sea-sickness.

At the same time as the waves of bad news wash over us, there is some startling analysis from unexpected quarters. Robert Peston, the BBC's star business editor argues that this global financial crisis will be more 'significant than the collapse of communism', that the situation showed our 'monumental financial folly' and in assessing the causes of the crisis agrees that it was 'over-consumption and a high reliance on credit.' He argues that a new kind of capitalism will emerge from the ruins of the old.

The church should 'outclass' anything society has to offer

Hope that this new kind of capitalism will be sustainable, environmentally friendly and just is still faint. The governments of the world seem united in their opinion that the way out of this mess is for us to continue with the actions that got us there in the first place – spend, spend, spend.

So what hope is there and where at the beginning of a dark recession is the light going to come from? At our first *Breathe* conference, Bishop Graham Cray challenged us that the collective life of the church should 'outclass' anything society has to offer. The light should be like a city on a hill, it should be visible. Hope should come from the church, but what might that look like?

UPDATE 8: Christmas 2007

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INSIDE...
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What Would Jesus Buy?

Breathe Conference
1st March 08

Credit-Crunch Christmas

Enjoy the festive season without breaking the bank

Customers of Northern Rock might have believed a saviour had come when their savings were underwritten by the angels of the Treasury, following the bank's recent crisis. But any armchair economist might ask if the Government can afford to be so generous.

The truth is that the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the US and the knock-on impact on the global economy is only a paragraph in an inevitable tale of collapse. A look at the country's credit card statement offers little comfort. Britain's national

debt is climbing towards one trillion pounds depending on how you do the sums; America has surpassed five trillion dollars. We are soon to reach a few gazillion, which is not even a real number (yet).

Living in the Credit Bubble

In our 'buy now, pay later' culture, how long will it be before someone has to pick up the tab? Can individuals and governments live in a credit bubble for ever? The Jubilee 2000 pioneer Ann Pettifor thinks not. In her new book *The Coming First World Debt Crisis*, she paints a picture of a world heading towards insolvency through ballooning debts. The book predicts exactly what it says on the cover.

The press will continue to worry about interest rates this Christmas. Many would have us believe that the growing burden of debt will squeeze the joy out of Christmas. The season's expectations add to a burden that can lead either to counting each and every bean, or spend, spend, spending in defiance.

Owe Nothing but Love

Breathe will not win the Nobel Prize for Economics. We can't solve the debt crisis. But we can draw some lessons from Paul's financial advice to the Romans: 'owe nothing but a debt of love' (Romans 13:8). On one level this is about paying our balances. We

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great interest rates

should honour our pledges (student loans included) and seek to avoid spending beyond our means.

Tightening our belts doesn't have to squeeze the joy out of Christmas

But there's also a deeper, more revolutionary meaning. The true debt we should pay is love. Contrary to the gloom of economic forecasts, tightening our belts doesn't have to squeeze the joy out of Christmas. The gifts that really count this festive season are gifts of love.

Apparently 9 out of 10 Christmas gifts are forgotten. Breathe takes no delight in a downturn in the economy, but if it makes us consider the gifts money can't buy, then it's not all bad news. If you want to love beyond your means this Christmas, go for broke not with presents, but with love. Give costly care, bless the poor, give time and thanks and joy. After all, God's credit for those kinds of expenses is literally limitless.

Chris Webster is a friend of Breathe

Christmas is, at its core, a story of hope. Jesus is the ultimate bringer and messenger of hope. Hope for a forgiven life, hope for a renewed heart, hope for a transformed mind, hope for a better day to come that changes how we live in the moment we're in. In the manger lay a child of hope.

It would certainly be my hope that at this time when our nation needs it so badly, something could be born in the life of the church that will bring hope and 'outclass' the offers of the high street and the empty promises of the consumer dream. Hope that the church will become long term investors (treasures in heaven) and philanthropists (rich generosity). That our common

life will be marked by freedom from anxiety (don't worry about tomorrow) and, even in recession we keep the wolf from each others doors (sharing with those in need). That amid the struggles we would be full of joy.

In other words hope resides in a rediscovery and redemption of the story of Christmas, that as the waves of consumerism crash in again, those who look to the manger would '*no longer conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds*' (Romans 12:2).

Phil Whittall is a friend of **Breathe**

Friends United

Who are the Friends of **Breathe**? Are they a clandestine network with global influence? Or not? Are their noble decisions to live more simply always a swimming success? We caught up with them to see what changes 2008 saw in their lifestyles.

Phil Whittall

Phil lives in his beloved Shrewsbury, with wife Emma and baby Noah. He pastors North Shrewsbury Community Church, co-owns a Christian bookshop and writes the Simple Pastor blog (which is modest because he's actually quite intelligent!).

What changes have you made in 2008?

2008 has seen us go for washable nappies with our new baby. We wanted to make an effort to get away from throwaway culture, and to save some money too. We've also tried to be adventurous in our giving to church and other causes. At times there's been a choice between giving and spending on ourselves. I feel like every time we've made the choice to give it's been the right choice and somehow we've been blessed.



What about Christmas?

This year we're joining with other Christians around town to throw a party for those who might otherwise be on their own, trying to get back to the real meaning of Christmas.

Holly Ellson

Holly Ellson until recently worked for Christian Aid, she currently works with schools to improve sustainability and is about to start with Peaceworks. When she's not juggling jobs she's involved with youth and children's work at Immanuel, Chichester, and has recently discovered the joys of running.

What changes have you made in 2008?

Having lost some weight I needed some new clothes, but I've been checking out second hand shops first and I'm on the hunt for some Fair Trade jeans. Being fully present to others is also something I'm working on – ignoring my phone and concentrating on the person I'm with at the time. I've actually found it much more relaxing!



I've joined a library, too, which plugs me into the local community. It's a great opportunity to mix with others, and a way to read that doesn't just benefit me personally.

Any other simple highlights from 2008?

A few of us got together in Oxford in the autumn for a **Breathe** retreat. I really enjoyed the chance to take time out with God and get to know others with a shared sense of the challenge of leading less materialistic lives.

Jeremy Williams

Jeremy is newly married, lives in Luton and works for Scripture Gift Mission. He enjoys writing and co-authors the Make Wealth History blog.

What changes have you made in 2008?

I've been trying not to fly, which has meant taking the train on holidays. Unfortunately this has ruled out warmer holiday destinations. But we're now going to treat it like a challenge – we've done Eurostar, we've tried Edinburgh, and next we're going to get the ferry to Norway.



I'm also trying to eat more seasonally. I wonder, for instance, if having strawberries all year round keeps us from

appreciating them. Seasonal eating has introduced me to the delights of celeriac, beetroot, and other bizarre vegetables, but actually I'm actually really glad I've done it. My food is now fresher, more diverse and more local.

Are these hard and fast rules for you?

No they're not. I think you always have to be flexible. For example, there's a place for flying to visit relatives, but it's about treating it less as a habit and more as a privilege.

Chris Webster

Chris works on Global Vision's Rapid Response team, which takes him around the world. He has just returned from a month in the Congo.

What changes have you made in 2008?

I somehow missed out on the gene that takes care of budgeting and spreadsheets. But this year I've tried to tackle this aversion to numbers and am really trying to nail down the figures. So I've done some of the maths and it turns out that even on my charity salary, I earn far more than I need and I can give away a lot more than I do.

Before the number crunching, I had no idea how much I spent on globally-franchised caffeine related drinks!

I've made some stuttering attempts to leave the car behind for the bike. And I'm taking more time out of a busy schedule to relax, exercise and give space to what's really important. I think 2008 has helped me prove in small and practical ways how *Breathe's* original proposition of less stuff, more life, actually works.



How about next year?

I've recognised that I've become dependent on (addicted to?) news and technology – gadgets, sounds, www, screens and technology. I would like to live more simply, more naturally. This is certainly a challenge moving forward as right now I can't go a day without 'logging on'. But if I want more life, this is where to start.

Mark Powley

Mark lives in Hammersmith where he's an associate pastor of St Paul's Hammersmith. Ailsa and he now have three boys.

What changes have you made in 2008?

This year saw us get more serious about global warming, hugely influenced by watching Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth*. We've worked harder to insulate the house, use less heat and avoid leaving things on standby. Another factor for us this year has been having a bigger car. With three kids we were struggling in our 3-door Yaris! But we actually went one further and bought 7-seater. Why? Because for me being simple shouldn't always mean being stingy – it's great to be able to offer lifts and fit in extra friends.



What are your hopes for *Breathe*?

Breathe is now three years old and I feel we're constantly learning more about what it means to break the consumer mould. I hope that we can grow in numbers while keeping things practical and real. I hope we can model something truly attractive about a lifestyle inspired by Jesus, and that we can contribute to a wider debate in society about where we place our value.

What is Breathe?

- A space to think about how we handle money, time and possessions in a Christian way
- Non-judgemental, realistic and simple to be part of
- We want to:
 - Appreciate** life more fully
 - Refuse** the consumer dream
 - Connect** with others
 - Choose** a more generous lifestyle

Breathe is a Christian network for simpler living. It represents orthodox Christians of all kinds and is overseen by Friends: Jeremy Williams, Phil Whittall, Chris Webster, Rev Mark Powley and Holly Ellson.

Join Breathe

To receive free quarterly updates like this, by email or by post, send a blank email to in@ibreathe.org.uk. Or contact us at Breathe, c/o St Paul's Church, Hammersmith W6 9PJ

Breathe Again

Be at the second Breathe Conference

After the first *Breathe* Conference an astounding 99% of those who attended suggested that we do another conference. Who are we to disagree?

When? Saturday March 28th 2009 10am–3pm

Where? St Paul's Hammersmith, London

Who? The keynote speaker will be Pete Grieg from 24/7 Prayer, oh and some of the *Breathe* guys

How much? A fiver if you work, nothing if you don't

What else? A chance to connect with others seeking a new way of living, a chance to talk, to reflect, to be inspired, encouraged and changed.

Why should I come? Er... see the last answer

*More details in the next **Breathe** update*

Three Life Lessons from WALL-E

First, you're going to have to get over the irony. Disney, the purveyors of toys, trinkets and screen-based entertainment have produced a film about the dangers of over-consumption and... screen-based entertainment! But do you know what? The message is amazing. Wall-e is a timely, deft, visually stunning and morally fruitful work of animation. It's a cinematic invitation to a less consumerist way of life; like a *Breathe Update* with a \$180 million budget. So what truths can be seen in this prophetic movie?

1 Fascination

Wall-e is a robotic waste disposal unit. He lives almost entirely in isolation on a futuristic and desolate planet earth. Wall-e is a hangover from the days when humans still lived on the earth, surrounded by ever-increasing waste, before they jetted off to space having trashed the entire planet.

What's amazing about Wall-e is that over the years 'he' (for want of a better pronoun) has learnt not only to clear away trash but to delight in it. He plays with what he finds, reuses it, collects, restores and redeems it. Whereas the original users of what he finds clearly grew tired of it, Wall-e is fascinated (the fun he has with a fire extinguisher is incredible).

It's a triumph of messy, real, earthy humanity over a life lived through screens.

Wall-e is an example of how we can recover the art of fascination. We have so many things to delight in, to wonder at, to use carefully and reuse creatively. Throwing away is a poor option; as GK Chesterton said, 'waste is unpoetic'. Wall-e isn't just appreciative, he's subversive – he upturns consumer logic (new is best; use it up-throw it away; delight in what is most expensive). Maybe we could do the same.

2 Love

By some sublime and inexplicable process, Wall-e has evolved a personality all of his own, then as the movie

develops he falls in love with a mysterious visitor – Eve (does this ring bells for anyone?). At this point, for all his fascination with recycled trash, he drops his previous pursuits like a hot stone. He has found a companion, and this puts all the stuff in the world in perspective.

Eve brings into Wall-e's world the magic of another person. We, too, have this incredible gift available to us in the form of family, friends and neighbours. But how often do we allow amassing, collecting and playing with stuff to get in the way?



3 Liberation

Love takes Wall-e, with Eve, to a luxury starliner on which humans now live. Here we find that humanity has evolved into a generation of armchair slobs. Carted around on hover-chairs they are constantly lulled, soothed and distracted by the TV screens in front of them. (For some very interesting reason images of this chilling and provocative aspect of the movie are very hard to find online).

Anyway, Wall-e's clumsy arrival on the ship provides a way out of this lifestyle. In one important scene a woman's screen is broken and through this she, Mary, meets John and the two of them stare out wonderingly at the beautiful immensity of space. Wall-e is a tale of liberation. It's a triumph of messy, real, earthy humanity over a life lived through screens. It's a movie for our times, and a sign that even in Hollywood the green shoots of an alternative lifestyle are beginning to poke their heads through the soil.

*Mark Powley is a friend of **Breathe**.*

Why not watch Wall-e with friends and ask:

- How do we relate to the stuff in our lives – with resourcefulness and delight, or resignation and dullness?
- How does collecting and playing with stuff sometimes take the place of love?
- What might liberation look like?