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At Home with God: Towards a Christian theology of Home-making

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Abstract

What, if anything, distinguishes the domestic life of Christians from people of other faiths or none? People are constantly shaping and being shaped by the world around them and perhaps no more so than in their homes. This article explores how, as Christians, our faith is expressed in our homemaking.

Keywords: Home, Home-making, Faith, witness, distinctive.

Introduction

If a stranger walked into your house what might they tell of your beliefs by sight alone? What exists in your home that might be witness to some kind of Christian affiliation beyond a neatly placed Bible verse or a well-appointed cross? What distinguishes your home from your atheist, agnostic, Muslim neighbours? In this article I ponder the relationship between homes and Christian faith.

The consideration of Christian life ranges widely from personal faith to public theology, and yet I have found comparatively little written exploring Christian belief as manifested in cosmetic aspects of home. Plenty about home as it pertains to family and relationships but little to say about home in its material sense of space and possessions.

I have wondered if our lives as Christians in the west could or indeed should look materially different to the rest of western society. I have wanted to consider in what ways our homes, through their designated spaces and our possessions therein can access, inhibit, amplify or distort the gospel. I am not wishing to prescribe what a Christian must or must not possess by way of property or household goods but rather, I am hoping to engage the homemaker in a process of theologically reflecting on what we own and what our having it might mean.

In Bill Bryson's 2011 publication, *At Home*, this renowned travel writer, a man whose books have taken us across the globe continent by continent, was inspired to publish perhaps his longest work yet without taking us much outside the porch of his former Church of England rectory home in tranquil Norfolk. He writes:

Houses are amazingly complex repositories. What I found, to my great surprise, is that whatever happens in the world - whatever is discovered or created or bitterly fought over - eventually ends up, in one way or another, in your home. Wars, famines, the industrial revolution, the Enlightenment - they are all there in your sofas and chests of drawers tucked into the folds of your curtains, in the downy soft-ness of your pillows... Houses aren't refuges from history. They are where history ends up.¹

Like Bryson, the inspiration for my own study here comes from an awakening of curiosity about why we make home the way we do.

Richard Giles similarly seeks to raise our awareness of the places we inhabit in his 1996 publication *Re-Pitching the Tent*. Writing to inspire the re-ordering of church buildings for worship and mission in the new millennium he wanted to show how design, layout, and objects speak powerfully of our concepts of God and indeed of ourselves as faith communities. When Giles writes about churches he does so in the sense of referring to the bricks and mortar of the parish church. We might ideally want to say that church is people rather than buildings but Giles helps us to see that, while this is in one sense right and proper, it is through their building that people express their beliefs, preferences and affiliations. 'We should never underestimate the influence of our building upon the way we think about God, about each other... Our places of assembly need to speak clearly to us of what we are about as the people of God.'² You will see across church denominations how the prominence of objects and use of space within the assembly speak of emphasis within that community: the altar, the baptismal pool, the pulpit or increasingly a stage for a band or even cafe tables. Giles encourages us to engage consciously with the local parish church building in regard to its space and contents and consider what it might portray or betray in terms of our doctrines and pedagogy. It is that same attention we might begin to give here, to another church building – the home.

Part I: The Making of Home

No Place Like it

Look around your home. One thing to notice, and an astoundingly obvious point, is that your surroundings are very unlike those of first century Palestine. It is nevertheless a point worth considering that both the physical structures of your house and the relationships therein are likely to share little in common with the architectural and cultural norms of Jesus' time. We can no more retrieve from scripture an ideal view for what the home should physically look like than we can hope to somehow get back to an ideal biblical formula for family. The family in Hebrew scripture is depicted in various ways, some of which may not be considered desirable today. Equally, the physical space of domestic dwelling appears in various

¹ Bill Bryson, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life* (London: Black Swan, 2011), p. 22.

² Richard Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent: Re-ordering the church building for worship and mission in the new millennium* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1996), p. 57.

forms. This is not to say the Bible is silent on the issues of family or home, but our engagement with these concepts is considerably more complex than simply quoting a verse and deducing a principle. Therefore, any comment from scripture, Old or New Testament pertaining to house or any other variable description of human dwelling may refer to something quite physically different to what we understand as home in the context of 21st century England.

It seems that any attempt to locate the theological purpose of home will be problematic, not least because home is a modern category not synonymous with the ancient household. Indeed, terms like 'home' have a certain resonance in western consumer society that they may not have possessed even as recently as a few hundred years ago. So, what has happened? How did we get to where we are today in our thinking about home? For this we will venture back to England under Queen Victoria.

The Victorians

It was the Victorians who first fostered a particular love of comfort and ornament in the house. No age had before nurtured such energy for interior design. The Victorian home flourished with mesmerising patterns on carpets and curtains, fine brass bedsteads, walls covered with framed pictures, surfaces with trinkets, china and yet more heavily draped, ornate fabric. All this, in part at least, was due to the influence of industrialisation. Long term political stability had brought relative prosperity to England and with technological advances speeding up production the accumulation of goods was no longer limited to the aristocracy, it had become the habit of the flourishing middle-classes. This was a foretaste of our now well-established consumer culture.

Where work had once orbited one's place of residence (agricultural homesteads and the like), in an ever more mobile, mechanised society, people would more commonly 'go to work' in factories and banks and then 'come home' to this new sanctuary. In England 'the house' which had long been a semi-public space, (as it has remained in some other cultures) was gradually becoming a private-world to which one might retreat with ones kin from the pressures of the noisy outside. The now popular western understanding of 'home' was emerging.

This haven called home had the intention of shielding its inhabitants from ungodly influences. Ironically, by the end of the 19th century however, the language once reserved for one's heavenly destination was ever more used with reference to one's earthly residence. As one gathered all one's possessions under one roof, it became a private kingdom to which one might retreat in idyllic contentment.³

³John Gillis writes 'to home was transferred all the meanings of comfort and rest that had once been associated only with heaven... Home had become a sacramental site, complete with the redemptive qualities previously associated with holy places' John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: A History of Myth and Ritual in Family Life* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 116.

Locating the house of God

This privatisation of the home solidified some already questionable trends in the life of the church. By this time Christians had spent the best part of fifteen hundred years gathering for worship in buildings outside the domestic dwellings common to the early church.

Since Constantine had elevated the Christian faith in his empire, the Church had moved to bigger premises. The houses in which they *had* met were less suitable to accommodate thriving numbers. While this alliance with the state certainly presented great opportunity for the spread of the gospel across the Roman Empire, it came at a cost. According to Giles it precipitated an alteration in the way Christians viewed themselves as church

the concept of the Christian assembly as the holy priestly people of God was lost, so much so that the word 'church' itself became devalued. No longer designating the assembly, it came to mean merely the building where the assembly met... The people of God had forgotten that they were the Church; they merely went to church.⁴

By the late Victorian era, Church was well established as an outside event to the life of the emerging family home. As we have seen with the place of work; similarly the church was something people went to, and from which they came home. Life was being increasingly fractured and compartmentalised into its various spheres - work, social, religious and indeed home life. It was evermore popularly said that an Englishman's home was his castle; to which an unspoken subtext began to read, God has his house and we have ours!

Home secrets

Since the Victorians began stuffing their mantelpieces with mass-produced ornamental wonder, we have rarely looked back. At the turn of the millennium we saw an abundance of television programming dedicated to home-improvements. An abundance of books too, devoted to the practice of homemaking, exclaiming 'your well-decorated home is an extension of your personality.'⁵ That may be so but the home is not merely an extension of *your* personality it is the mediator of all kinds of cultural and historical elements that have effected both you and your abode before you came together. Daniel Miller observes such is the volume of influencing factors upon our homemaking it is near impossible for anthropologists to extract an absolute theory that will provide mastery of the process.

The home is indeed a powerful instrument of objectification... Hardly ever is the result a clear reflection of the intentions of the human actor. The process of accommodating is battered by floods of other factors: the agency of the

⁴ Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent*, pp. 43-44.

⁵ Carley Roney, *[the nest] home design handbook*, (New York: Random House, 2008), p. 9.

house itself... the dictates of the state, the profession of architecture, the limits of resources...⁶

We easily recognise how human relationships shape us directly but perhaps less obvious is the role that our physical surroundings and objects will play in configuring and stabilising our identity. De Botton says:

We depend on our surroundings obliquely to embody the moods and ideas we respect and then to remind us of them. We look to our buildings to hold us, like a psychological mould, to a helpful vision of ourselves... Our love of home is in turn an acknowledgement of the degree to which our identity is not self determined. We need home in the psychological sense as much as we need one in the physical: to compensate for a vulnerability... We need our rooms to align us to desirable versions of ourselves.⁷

De Botton's observations cause me to ask: Where do these desirable versions of ourselves come from?

However tempting it may be to imagine the formation of our homes as a cerebral and individual affair, this is far from the case. However much we may think our homemaking represents 'who I am', it may more often be said to represent 'who we are'. As we humans undertake our world-making we are subject to that world having had a shaping effect on us. When we are born we enter an on-going negotiation between our internal selves and our external material and cultural environment. While we may imagine we are making conscious autonomous choices about our surroundings and possessions, we must allow for the influence of culture and material environment both in our past and present having impressed upon our ability to imagine anything outside of them in future. Human beings have always been involved in shaping the world around them but we do not always give recognition to the effect our world has had in shaping us. It is a cycle we are all born into. The environments within which we are nurtured have a profound effect on us as we fly the nest and establish our own. Miller observes that the world we enter provides in subtle ways our frame of reference, from which we create all future worlds:

Before we can make things, we are ourselves grown up and matured in the light of things that come down to us from previous generations. We walk around the rice terraces or road systems, the housing and gardens that are effectively ancestral. These unconsciously direct our footsteps, and are the landscapes of our imagination, as well as the cultural environment to which we adapt.⁸

⁶ Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 108

⁷ Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006), p. 107.

⁸ Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 53.

T. J Gorringe agrees: 'People en-story and en-soul their places and then, in the course of the dialectic of material life, their places en-soul them.'⁹

Pierre Bourdieu is one who tried to explain the process by which people come to see the world. In his 'theory of praxis' he observed that we do many things because we have subconsciously adopted behaviours and values rather than having been specifically taught them.

By learning to interact with a whole slew of different material cultures, an individual grows up assuming the norms that we call culture. The child doesn't learn these things as a passive set of categories, but through everyday routines that lead to consistent interaction with things.¹⁰

Much of what we are is encoded by the culture we inhabit beyond our awareness of it. We are products of what Pierre Bourdieu called habitus. What to us is common sense and plain as day is so because we have been nurtured in an environment that is powerfully suggestive. For example, as a minister I am often welcomed into residential properties of all shapes and sizes for funeral visits or other pastoral reasons. What I notice is the striking similarity in décor, furnishings and designated function of space. Nobody sat all these people down and formally taught them what they must do with their homes and yet there seem to be common defaults.

I recently visited two sets of friends at their respective homes here in the England. One couple are millionaires who live in a large rural property in the north of the country. The other friends live in a two bedroom flat on a large urban estate in the south. In some respects their dwellings are worlds apart. However, there are striking similarities to be found. Take for example their living rooms. Yes, the barn conversion may boast a Haparanda sofa with ivory slip covers designed by Erika Pekkari while the urban flat offers whatever the charity furniture shop could provide, but the very fact that they both have living rooms and sofas arranged around Tele's speaks of a western cultural preference for designated leisure space, aspirations of comfort and the prominence of electronic media. Subtle processes have taken place whereby they have adopted this set-up as a social norm. This is anecdotal of what Bourdieu's theory of habitus seeks to highlight. Yes, my friends' homes are of significantly different dimensions and the objects therein further reveal a clear economic disparity. But to all intents and purposes the rooms and objects contained serve a similar vision of what home should look like in England today; a vision to which my own home conforms.

My kettle and me

We might not enjoy the implication that external forces inform our decision-making about home. We might argue there simply exist needs for which our ancestors handed down efficient practical solutions that we are happy to accept: a knife to cut

⁹ T.J. Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment* (Cambridge: University Press, 2002), p. 38.

¹⁰ Miller, (2010), p. 53.

things, a clock to tell the time, a picture to remember relatives? Surely there is nothing wrong with a sofa for comfort or a TV for information and entertainment either? This may be so but utility is but only one function these objects aid us with. We may require certain belongings for subsistence but another less obvious and rather more complicated function is being met. Douglas and Isherwood explain, 'It is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social meaning.'¹¹ Our relation to objects as individuals, however chaotic it may appear, manifests out of our rationality as social beings. We are subject to multiple social obligations only some of which can be named and our purchase of goods and construction of habitat is thus rationalised. 'Goods assembled together in ownership make physical, visible statements about the hierarchy of values to which their chooser subscribes.'¹² As we observed from Bill Bryson: goods carry the history of politics, social life, and cultural, they speak of invention, convention and human ingenuity. Our belongings more than meet certain ideas of what we require and further to this they provide a representation of who we think we are.

To help us think about this I want us to consider kettles. Most of us have one, in the UK at least. The need it meets is to boil water. Simple enough. There are other vessels that perform this function but in the English kitchen for everyday use you will find a kettle. I own one. With my kettle I have the culmination of our ancestors thinking about how best to contain, boil and then pour water. So my kettle is a design solution for a perceived physical need. We could probably go back and trace step by step the evolution of this common kitchen item but that is not really my interest. What I want to know is *what* my volcanic orange, enamelled steel, stove top kettle with matt black phenolic trim from Le Creuset, RRP £70, does for me beyond my need to regularly boil water. What is my relationship to this kettle? What else is it doing for me that might make it worth the expense? Are there moral and spiritual considerations here?

Douglas and Isherwood say, 'Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty.'¹³ So what exactly am I thinking with my fancy kettle? Le Creuset goods come with a lifetime guarantee; so is my kettle speaking of permanence and my desire to settle down? Le Creuset is an enviable kitchen brand so perhaps I am aligning myself with a popular notion of taste. Or maybe I just like the colour and the retro whistling sound evokes happy memories from my childhood. Perhaps I do not like it at all but my wife does, or maybe it was simply given to us. Each object in our homes is subject to a similar, almost indecipherable web of meaning. We might argue it is near impossible to figure out what our possessions are saying, but one thing they are not is passive. Our homes speak of our preferences, values, behaviours, and allegiances. These messages can be scrambled nearly beyond all comprehension but they still murmur in the background of life at home.

¹¹ Mary Douglas & Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 38.

¹² Douglas & Isherwood (1996) p. ix.

¹³ Douglas & Isherwood (1996) pp. 40-41.

The flourishing middle classes since the Victorians have seen the appropriation of goods as less of a hurdle as more and more stuff is on offer to us. What may once have been considered to be luxury items are now commonplace in most homes. In his book, *The System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard teaches that as a consequence of this, now that we *have what we need*, our relationship to objects is changing. The traditional influences that decided what was good taste – such as the church – have lost their social dominance. The old codes of objectivity that would have been the milieu of the Victorians have crumbled.

This modern home-dweller does not ‘consume’ his objects... Instead of consuming objects, he dominates, controls, and orders them. He discovers himself in the manipulation and tactical equilibration of a system... omitting all the origins, received meanings and ‘essences’ of which our old pieces of furniture remained concrete symbols... the world no longer given but instead produced – mastered, manipulated, inventoried, controlled: a world in short, that has to be *constructed*.¹⁴

Our possession of objects used to just demonstrate what we could afford. Now, since very many more people can afford objects that used to be the reserve of the elite, these objects – our possessions, furniture, goods – not only operate as trophies demonstrating our ability to meet our own needs but communicate information about our aspirations and our affinities. In 21st century England, we are more conscious than we ever have been of the perceived ability to choose who we are. However, this does not erase Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. We still do not choose who we are in isolation from outside persuasions, ‘It should be noted that everyday life is still very largely governed by the traditional forms of praxis.’¹⁵ And those traditional forms of praxis undergo subtle changes themselves, which create new forces of habitus.¹⁶ There is simply taking place an awakening to our role in shaping who we are. The rift from received structures means there is much up for grabs as we are apparently free to reassemble, design and construct that which matters most to us as individuals. However, our ideas of ourselves are still *not* born in a vacuum. They are carried in and through the stuff of life and we continue to mature amid the battering of huge cultural currents. The decline of formal religion has seen it lose its strength as a moral arbiter, so a void has opened into which other powers have moved to stake a claim, to manufacture and manipulate our desires.

It was the advertising pioneer Earnest Elmo Calkins who is regarded as having first coined the phrase ‘consumer engineering’. In the 1932 publication of that same title

¹⁴Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 28.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Perspectives critical of Bourdieu accused his research of being too specific to French culture and ambiguous concerning future cultural developments upon habitus. Bourdieu defended habitus saying, ‘Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experience, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies the structures’ (Pilario, 2005, p.237) Or in other words, habitus is like money, it changes value over time and in different cultures but it is still currency.

Calkins suggested that ‘goods fall into two classes: those which we use, such as motor cars, and safety razors, and those which we use up, such as toothpaste, or soda biscuits. Consumer engineering’ he says, ‘must see to it that we use up the kind of goods we now merely use.’¹⁷ Hence 3DHD televisions replace the common plasma screen that only five minutes ago replaced the state-of-the-art cathode ray sets which themselves are less than a few years old. The role of the advertising agency has been to expand the idea of what we think we need. My intent in mentioning this is not moral indignation. I do have moral and environmental concerns about waste and exploitation but this is not my particular focus here. I am not being condescending about what you fill your homes with (People with £70 kettles should not throw stones!). I do not wish to get dragged into a lengthy discussion about the potential ills of consumer society. Nor am I wishing to pronounce edicts about what the Christian should or should not possess. That is not my goal. My real aim is to pose the question of what other narratives (like Calkins), are at play in our homes. What are the dominant stories that your home is telling? Ideas of what home might be stream into our subconscious like never before, left relatively unqualified by our needs and rarely evaluated by our faith. Unless these ideas of home are identified and named we are in danger of conforming without discerning the potential ills of doing so. My suspicion is we would have to work hard to distinguish between the stories our homes tell as Christians from those stories told by the homes of our neighbours of all faiths or none.

Part II: The Beginnings of a Response

Home birth

As we have observed, in our world-making we are both producer and product of our culture. As Miller affirms in the work of Bourdieu, ‘there is nature, but culture gives us our second-nature, that which we habitually do without thought... the whole system of things, with their internal order, make us the people we are.’¹⁸ Or as Gillis puts it:

Biology by itself is incapable of providing us with a habitable world... humans must be born twice, once physically and a second time culturally... The symbolic universes we inhabit are populated with our significant others, with meaningful objects, and with the times and places we hold sacred. Constituting our mental maps and calendars, they provide us in a magical way with a sense of order and predictability that allows us to cope with the chaos of daily life.¹⁹

Interesting that Gillis should use such language. The concept of second birth is of course not unfamiliar within Christian tradition. It is therefore my conviction that our homes need a second birth: a conscious process by which we assess who we are

¹⁷ Calkins quote from Deyan Sudjic, *The Language of Things* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 14.

¹⁸ Miller, (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 53.

¹⁹ John R. Gillis, *A World of their Own Making: A History of Myth and Ritual in Family Life* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 61.

in relation to God at home, a kind of re-birth or baptism of home. This is all very well but what would it look like? I cannot find a reference point. It is not as if there is a Christian design motif.

If I wanted to give my home a makeover in the style of a Parisian boutique, Japanese minimalism or a New York loft I would pursue transposing these ideas onto my home space. I would find objects to satisfy my chosen design within the dimensions of my home and financial parameters. So the *Dessin Fournir* stools in *Glant* patent leather take their place alongside *Deauville* tables and *Gretchen Bellinger* woollen shades or perhaps I prefer the *Tatami* mats and *Shoji* doors, providing that simple, light and organized feel. This is just one of a great number of approaches taken within the discipline of interior design and one that does not suit our purpose here; inasmuch as we cannot possibly provide this kind of blueprint for Christian homes. What furnishings should we say befit the family of faith? To head down this route would doubtless end in the kind of pious proclamations I am hoping to avoid. Another possible approach to interior design is that undertaken in the early 1980s by environmental psychologists Miller and Schlitt. The study suggested nine common themes taken from a sample of people answering such questions as:

Describe, and give the location of, your important activities within the home. What significant experiences do you remember having there? Describe the feelings you have in each room. If this room could talk, what would it say to you, and how would it describe itself? What would your ideal home look like?²⁰

The themes from interviewees were summarized as control, privacy, identity, security, order, variety, aesthetics, choice, and sociability. The satisfaction of these themes appeared to depend on the nature and quality of interior design.

Initially, I wanted to achieve my home re-birth by creating a similar inventory of desirable qualities. For example, I may look at my home and say (for argument's sake) as a Christian I want it to be hospitable, communal, beautiful etc. However, there are some problems with such an approach. We would struggle to make a case for these qualities being exclusively Christian! Another issue is raised highlighted in Rowan Williams' *On Christian Theology*. Williams shows that the world does not stand still as we seek to make it:

Each effort to make the world 'belong' to us, to make sense, puts a fresh question; each organizing or explanatory strategy becomes itself a new puzzle or code, in need of imaginative 'reading' and 're-ordering'. In a paradoxical yet quite familiar way, human beings are, in one and the same activity, looking for and creating meaning: patterns of order, schemes of communication in which the confusing experience of life in the world to which we belong... is drawn into language, into the ever-extending web of

²⁰ Stuart Miller and Judith Schlitt, *Interior Space: Design concepts for personal needs* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985), p. 2.

sharing perception, experience, selfhood itself, that constitutes human being as human.²¹

This is an important observation. Because of turbulence in meaning we are troubled to find satisfactory adjectives to describe how our faith is facilitated in a place. While I might want to say the Christian home is hospitable, communal and beautiful, personal biases impress on my understanding of what these words mean when turned into actions. The meanings of language and objects are too easily hostages to their time and context. So if I say the Christian home is ‘hospitable’ I would assume the utility of hospitality according to my white, British, middle-class, conceit of it. Which, as we have seen, will likely correlate more to cultural trends than any obvious Christian lineage. Upon hearing the word ‘hospitable’ we are triggered to utilize our surroundings in a particular way; we might reach for the Wedgewood dinner set and Wusthof cutlery! Every word like hospitality or community solicits a subsequent question of what that looks like in practice; what is needed to fulfil the task of being hospitable: What kind of hospitality? What kind of community? What kind of beauty? One person’s sense of what is needed to achieve a hospitable vision of home might be quite different from another’s. One might say we need the best china and a solid top maple and ivory coffee table. *We need that substantial reception room to house dinner guests in comfort, right?* Among Christians you would not find consensus on what constitutes hospitality. For example, proponents of a prosperity gospel might find fault with Henri Nouwen’s vision of hospitality where poverty is considered the greatest host.²²

A long way home

So where should we turn next in our exploring Christian homemaking? During the late 19th century western Christianity was becoming a private affair, withdrawing to the home as a place for nurturing an individual’s faith in the context of immediate family. Consequently ‘The vision of a home beyond history and nature that had previously motivated lifelong pilgrimage through the world now became a reason for retreat from it’.²³ In coming to see home as a private world of retreat not to be contaminated with the messiness of life outside we lost an essential component of the Christian story - what God did through the Incarnation, ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us’.²⁴ He did not stay remote in private heaven but got physically involved. If we are to baptise our homes into places that tangibly represent our faith as distinguished from our atheist, agnostic, Muslim or other neighbours; if home is to act as a visible sign of God’s grace; then we must look to Christ the ultimate sign. Homemaking then is a matter of our very interior, the human heart and its orientation to the person of God incarnate. ‘Christianity brings to all debates about the structures of the world through which we reproduce ourselves – economics, social... and building – its understanding of God become flesh’.²⁵

²¹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 198.

²² Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (London: Fount, 1996), p. 74. Read all of chapter 6.

²³ Gillis, p. 112.

²⁴ John 1:1-3 & 14.

²⁵ Gorringer (2002), pp. 2-3.

I suggest a significant step in the process of Christian homemaking is to permit the Incarnation to ask questions of what is essential to home. To shine the probing light of the Incarnation upon our cultural presuppositions of what home should be. This may get us behind-the-scenes of our homemaking habits in an uncomfortable way.

Home is where the heart is

What can we learn about homemaking from the Incarnation of God in Christ? For this purpose I have chosen to use the work of T.J Gorringer in *The Theology of The Built Environment* in which he contends that we approach en-storying place with a Trinitarian theology of creation, reconciliation, and redemption.²⁶

We begin with creation. God created the world and us in his image. We too have an enormous creative capacity. But what is creation for? I work from the position that humankind was created to commune with God and we are given the greatest example of this in the person of Jesus. He was created with purpose – to commune with and obey his father. Jesus said in John 4:34: ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.’

God created us for his purpose and so by extension our creating is for his purpose also. In this way we can take all our endeavours, including our homemaking, to be acts of worship and mission. If we discern a calling to a ministry in homemaking then each square foot of our domestic space and possessions therein labour to this end. As Pattison argues,

...all matter contains *logoi*, divinely given reasons and potentials from its very beginning... When matter is used, shaped, or formed, these *logoi* are changed and shaped by the *logoi* of the agents and things they encounter. While material objects do not have reason, consciousness, or free will, they have their own destiny and potential. This is realized in partnership with sentient, rational human beings. If humans undertake their creative work with matter seriously, they can present God’s gift back to God as an offering and contribute to the ultimate realization of the perfection which the deity wishes for all creation... Thus humans, matter, artefacts and the whole of creation participate in the divine joy in creation.²⁷

Pattison is interested in how we manipulate objects and conversely their power over us. I remember when I first watched the film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*. In one memorable scene Edward Norton’s character is slumped at a bar in utter despair having lost all his worldly possessions. The character played by Brad Pitts says with imperious cool: ‘The things you own, end up owning you’. These

²⁶ I am hugely condensing a process expressed exquisitely in Gorringer’s *Theology of the Built Environment* (2002).

²⁷ Stephen Pattison, *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts* (London: SCM Press), p. 249.

words reverberated in my head, sharing a distorted resonance with other words from another source: 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'.²⁸

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, through a now huge variety of media, our hearts are being courted. We are near constantly saturated with images from magazines, billboards, television and mobile technologies presenting competing visions of what our lives might look like. This is not some puritanical allegation directed at advertising agencies. They need not be apologetic and we should not be surprised. They spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on thirty-second adverts because they absolutely want us to buy whatever they are selling. That is their business! What we as consumers need to be aware of is how these products we purchase subsequently begin to shape our lives. Ask anyone with an iPhone!

In Matthew's gospel we read that Jesus says: 'No one can serve two masters'.²⁹ I suggest there is much to be discussed about the extent to which we are genuinely grappling with this tension in our homemaking. We would have a job to reconcile our common cultural aspirations for a private home unsullied by external interference with a model of Incarnation, that is, God come down from His glory to live among us and die on a tree.

This passage in Matthew provides some extraordinary practical advice in avoiding the trappings of consumerism. We are not to fill our storehouses here on earth where moth and vermin destroy but to seek first God's Kingdom.³⁰ We live here now but we do not belong here. Forgetting this means we easily find belonging in our *belongings* and in our places of dwelling rather than in our communion with God.

Reconciliation is the second aspect of the Incarnation I have chosen to consider. As we have seen, the popular notion of modern western homemaking is a largely private world of personal preference with little need to reconcile anything besides the décor colour palette. Baudrillard shows us how we order our lives through objects. They come to represent our values and aspirations. Our natural inclination is to control our environment and so our homes become places of conquest. We dominate and order them according to our taste. Having personal tastes and preferences is a banal fact of life, but as Christians there are other priorities to consider than our own. How in our homemaking are we being good stewards of creation? How in our homemaking are we regarding the needs of the poor? Our preferences (while not unimportant) must take a back seat to God's: 'Yet not my will but yours be done.'³¹ That is not to say that God's will is for us to live in abject poverty with no fixed abode or personal belongings but neither should we work from the assumption that God wants us to possess more and better things, live in a four bedroom detached house in a leafy suburb or even have a home anywhere at all.

²⁸ Matthew 6:21.

²⁹ Matthew 6:24.

³⁰ Matthew 6:19-20 and 6:33.

³¹ Luke 22:42.

Domination of our environment is not the aim but rather submission in all our ways to God's reconciling power. The work of God through creation seems less to do with domination of resources or surely God's reign would be already manifest simply by his exerting His divine self on us humans. But no, another path has been offered.

God has worked with humanity by reconciling us, dwelling among us and demonstrating His love through obedience and sacrifice: '...when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.'³² Death in the Bible seems to be alluded to frequently as one part of an altogether unlikely pairing with love. Death it would seem has something to do with the ministry of reconciliation. God reconciles humanity and reveals his great love through death. We read 'this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.'³³ Or, 'God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'³⁴ Or 'Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'³⁵ Again and again love and death make strange bedfellows in the work of reconciliation. It remains to say how our lives in every part, not least at home, enter into this work.

While it may seem enough to be reconciled with God, such is His love that he compels us to be reconciled with one another too. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'³⁶ I happen to get on with my neighbours so job done, right? Apparently not! 'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'³⁷ This is the love that must be integrated with our process of homemaking. A love that is incongruent with the relentless pursuit of self-actualization so commonly witnessed in the home and preyed on by consumer engineering.

We are not merely trying to become better versions of ourselves (whatever that might mean) we are to be reconciled with God and humankind by our becoming in the likeness of Christ. Jesus says, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'.³⁸ I wonder how my cross is being taken up in my home?

If I can now take us back to the image of baptizing the home and ask: what must die for the home to be born again into new life in Christ? St Paul offers this:

... he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard

³²Romans 5:10.

³³1 John 3:16.

³⁴Romans 5:8.

³⁵John 15:13.

³⁶Luke 10:27.

³⁷Matthew 5:43-44.

³⁸ Matthew 16:24.

no one from a worldly point of view... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!³⁹

We should no longer live for ourselves. The now popular notion of home as a glorious vessel for the expression of our personality that we observed earlier runs into some difficulty here. How can we tell this alternative story of dying to self within our homes? What would that look like? Some of Miller and Schlitt's nine themes - control, privacy, identity, security, choice - would stimulate interesting comparisons with this view of homemaking based on the Incarnation.

Finding our way home

Even with Gorringer's first two steps of a Trinitarian approach to the built environment - Creation (communion with God) and Reconciliation (demonstrating the love of Christ) - I am still troubled to talk in concrete terms about what this means for my home and all it contains; what it means for my kettle! As I approach the end of this study I near the beginning of a more arduous task. Here I turn to Gorringer's third step for the built environment: Redemption.

God the Redeemer (more traditionally, God the Holy Spirit) is the author of all hopeful visions and of all human creativity. 'God', then, is the inspirer of all those visions of a better human environment. ...Because 'God' is relational event there cannot be any divine blueprint ...but rather a constant negotiation of those spatial forms in which life, justice and joy are nurtured.⁴⁰

More than anything, I have wanted to ensure that I do not just coast along with a view of home largely fashioned by frequently unnamed cultural forces. In baptism we ask God to renew us by his Spirit. Of course this means renew us in all that we are and all that we do - even in our domesticity. How is the Holy Spirit renewing my homemaking? How is my home acknowledging my baptism? This is not done just by our asking '*How can I use my living room, games room and study for Jesus*'; however much this may sound like a good disposition we rarely permit ourselves to ask the preliminary question about our *having* of these things in the first place. We have imbibed a view of home as a repository for our personal taste and service depot for our needs. The assumption then is that we have what *we want* and we use *these things* for God's glory. Seems reasonable enough. Yet our *having* them remains mysteriously unquestioned. Of course it is fine for me to require that space, that bed, those blinds, that TV/DVD combo, that en-suite. You could be forgiven for thinking I am saying we should not have stuff: a bedroom, a living room, swimming pool etc. That is not the case. The process of how we go about making home is a great deal more demanding than our complying to a list of laws about what one may or may not possess or our receiving dictated measurements for our homes in cubits!⁴¹ However handy it might have been for me to be able to write *Ten Easy steps to a*

³⁹2 Corinthians 5.

⁴⁰ Gorringer (2000), p. 48.

⁴¹ Read 2 Chronicles for example where exact measurements are given for dwellings of the Lord and His people.

Mission-Shaped Home, our way forward is far more complex. Redemption is the work of the Spirit salvaging our every thought, action, all our world-making and drawing it into the way of the cross. It is allowing the Spirit to ask us why we live the way we do - why we need that kettle, that conservatory, that TV - and our being brave enough to face our honest responses.

Richard Giles looks to mindfully re-order the local parish church for worship and mission - from vestry to bell-tower, pew to pulpit. Bill Bryson goes room by room in his own home - from hall to attic, cellar to landing - casting his penetrating curiosity upon every passing object and every bit of architecture. Similarly, I have maintained throughout this study that we must raise consciousness of and unpick the competing influences on our homemaking. How is this done? I do have the beginnings of a process. I have offered one possible response: the response of interrogating prevailing narratives in our homes in light of the Incarnation. Perhaps too we can go on from here, heeding the words of St Paul: 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.'⁴² I have argued here that we have a job to undergo in our homemaking. What does it look like when grappling with creation, reconciliation and redemption? How can we reimagine home as a place of communing with God by the example of Christ in the power of the Spirit?

I have approached this study with the understanding that: 'The theologian's job is *not* to make the gospel credible to the modern world, but to *make the world credible to the gospel*.'⁴³ This is not the solitary work of an individual, it is one ministry of God's Church. Mark Clavier says 'the Church's mission to the world can be fruitfully conceived as an invitation to people immersed in an inhumane consumer culture to become members of an ecclesial home...'⁴⁴ Clavier encourages us to think of church as the *oikos* or household of God, that church would become for us our first home. I do not disagree but I wonder whether it would be fruitful also to conceive of our homes as our first church.⁴⁵ Either way by further integrating the realms of church and home I suspect we come closer to realizing more of what makes Christianity distinctive, life giving and world changing. Until such a time as we adequately engage with this task, however, I fear that our neighbours will wonder exactly what Jesus has done for us that Laura Ashley curtains and Swedish furniture could not achieve.

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⁴² Romans 12:2

⁴³ Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (1989) 24

⁴⁴ Mark Clavier, *Rescuing the Church from Consumerism* (SPCK, 2013) 95

⁴⁵ Clavier's book (especially chapter 6) is a late addition to my studies

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