



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Stuff-Love
(*Consumerism*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Article:

📖 Curing Our Affluenza
(*Consumerism*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Stuff-Love

Our excessive love of stuff is not merely a modern affliction, but an enduring addiction. Rampant American consumerism, despite current rhetoric, has deep-seated roots. Why are we unable to rein in our insatiable drive to consumption?

Prayer

O God, awaken us to the challenges of this day. Open our eyes to the subtle pervasiveness of consumerism, that we might see our culture, the church, and ourselves in your divine light.

Remind us that you are the source of our hope and the giver of all that is good. You alone are worthy of our praise. Bring us to new life, that we might be your people. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 12:13-21

Reflection

Our being “restless in the midst of abundance,” de Tocqueville observed about Americans in the 1830’s, “is a spectacle as old as the world; all that is new is to see a whole people performing it.”

Restlessness amid abundance is the attitude that brought down Eden. The prophets chastised Israel for acquisitiveness as well as idolatry. Stuff-love, Singleton observes, is “rooted in the brand of idolatry described in Romans 1:25—worship of created things rather than the Creator. Regardless of how the good things come to us, there is still only one original Source, and we miss the boat when we place our trust anywhere else.”

Given this ancient lineage of our over-heated consumerism, changing our ways won’t be easy. We must:

- ▶ *perceive the increasing danger.* New technologies make over-consumption more hazardous. Our selfish habits and careless mistakes inflict greater harm on the environment. “Higher personal spending, including the service of consumer debt, drains disposable income that might otherwise contribute to social needs like healthcare and education.”
- ▶ *accept responsibility for our behavior.* We’re tempted to put total blame on advertising, as though it were “a very demon that has seduced us, dragging innocent, duped Americans unwillingly into the abyss of consumerism,” Singleton razzes. “Without such influences, apparently, we’d all be content to live like the Amish.” Let’s not excuse advertisers who use deceit and manipulation, but let’s admit that “if we seek self-confidence with our tooth whitener or status with our automobile, it’s because that’s what we really want—namely, to purchase our self-image like a commodity.”
- ▶ *critically weigh the new “simplicity” movement.* Through books and magazines, the movement’s “comfortable-enough-to-be-popular message to simplify sounds a bit like, ‘Try to cut down the credit card debt and buy organic, but hey, no one’s expecting you to go crazy here. Keep your basic cable.’” Beside promoting less than serious half-measures, there’s a danger that the simplicity movement will turn into a new form of self-indulgence. “I consume inconvenience, turning it



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into a pleasurable commodity," Bill McKibben writes, "it becomes the fuel for my own sense of superiority." The simple life turns out to be just another consumer lifestyle category: "Instead of defining ourselves by what we buy, we define ourselves by what we throw away."

Our challenge is to understand the appropriate boundaries on our consumption. In the church we have opportunities to explore these concerns and solutions with one another.

Study Questions

1. Do you see evidence that personal consumption increasingly competes with caring for the environment and meeting social needs, especially in America and other developed countries?
2. Consumerism has an ambiguous legacy in American history, Norman Wirzba reports (pp. 90-91). How has it been valuable? What problems has it left in its wake?
3. In the hymn "Bigger Barns," how is our over-consumption similar to the greed and personal insecurity of the rich man in Jesus' parable (Luke 12:16-21)?

Departing Hymn: "Bigger Barns"

"Bigger barns are what I need!"
So a rich man said one day.
"From my worries I'll be free
when my wealth is stored away."
"Fool!" God said, "Today you'll die!
Will your wealth mean anything?
All life's blessings really lie
in my life that wealth can't bring."

"Bigger barns are what we need
for our money, gadgets, more!"
Lord, we're tempted to believe
having wealth, we'll be secure!
Somewhere children cry for food
or to have a doctor's care.
Can our bigger barns be good
when poor neighbors know despair?

God of love, we long to know
what will make us truly blest.
Jesus taught us long ago
wealth won't give us peace or rest.
You are our security!
Safe in you, we serve, O Lord.
May we find we're rich indeed
when we're sharing with the poor.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (© 2001 All rights reserved.)
Suggested Tune: ABERYSTWYTH (Parry)

Rev. Gillette, co-pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Pitman, NJ, is author of *Gifts of Love: New Hymns for Today's Worship* (Geneva Press, 2000). Contact her at (856)-589-8444 or Bruce.Gillette@ecunet.org. A complete list of her hymns and links to twenty texts are at www.firstpresby.org/hymnlist.htm.

Stuff-Love

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching goals

1. To consider how deeply seated is human greed, such that over-consumption is an enduring addiction as well as a modern affliction.
2. To recognize temptations to scapegoat business and advertising, and to twist “simplicity” into another consumer lifestyle.
3. To explore consumerism’s ambiguous legacy in American culture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Consumerism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the hymn “Bigger Barns,” locate the tune ABERYSTWYTH (Parry) in your church’s hymnal.

Begin with a Comment

Share Alexis de Tocqueville’s comments about Americans in the 1830’s, which begins “Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die ...” (*Consumerism*, pp. 11-12).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 12:13-21 from a modern translation.

Reflection

As we begin to examine our consumerist culture in the light of the Gospel, we are struck by this tension: is our over-consumption merely a recent phenomenon, egged on by aggressive advertising and free-market capitalism, or is it an expression of an enduring human temptation to greed? The first diagnosis suggests that the problem is ‘outside’ us, so we should evaluate business practices and resist marketing lures; the latter diagnosis locates the cause ‘inside’ us and encourages self-examination of selfish desires rooted in the human heart. Laura Singleton finds truth in both views: “Though advancements in our technology are making current levels of consumption, by Americans in particular and the developed world overall, more hazardous than in the past, our excessive love of stuff is *not merely a modern affliction, but an enduring addiction*” (emphasis added, *Consumerism*, p. 11).

So, on the one hand she invites us to review the increasingly hazardous nature of our patterns of consumption, especially in America and the developed world. On the other hand, she warns us not to push all the blame on contemporary business and advertising practices, and even to be suspicious of the tendency to market the new “simplicity” movement as another consumer lifestyle.

In Luke 12:13-21, a man asks Jesus for a rabbinical judgment. Sensing the fellow’s underlying greed, Jesus warns the crowd “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” and tells them a parable about a rich fool. Verse 20 draws a connection between greed and idolatry through two details:

(1) God appears as a character to speak the words of judgment to the rich man, highlighting the opposition between them, and (2) the man is called a “fool,” which in the Jewish wisdom tradition is one who rejects God’s way of living. Seeking “one’s life” and personal security in the abundance of material goods exemplifies Paul’s definition of idolatry as “worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25).

Study Questions

1. Members may mention global warming, degradation of fisheries, air pollution, depletion of groundwater, pollution of fresh-water supplies, hazardous waste dumping, or other environmental problems that are exacerbated by greediness.

In relation to social needs, they might notice that the wealthy give a smaller percentage of their income to the church and other benevolences than do the poor (*Consumerism*, p. 11). Charitable giving has been declining for three decades. The *empty tomb, inc.* reports even church members gave less and less percentage of their income to the church and other benevolences from 1968 to 2000: overall giving decreased from 3.10% to 2.64% (a decline of 15%); giving to their local congregation declined from 2.45% to 2.24% (a drop of 9%); and giving to all other benevolences dropped from 0.66% to 0.40% (a decline of 39% as a portion of income). You can download graphs for discussion from their website, www.emptytomb.org.

Encourage members to discuss local church or community issues that might indicate we are less concerned about the common good.

2. Wirzba notes that consumerism played a valuable role in establishing liberty and democracy in America. “As diverse ethnic groups came to America, the purchase of commodities gave them the opportunity to at least appear to be on an equal footing with others. What was being consumed, in other words, were not only material goods but also personal identities. With the right clothing or car, the appropriate cigarette or appliance, they could break from old traditions without necessarily abandoning, or, as was the case in many old-world cultures, violently clashing with them, and thus enter the cultural mainstream.... [Thus] consumerism is not simply about greed or personal insecurity. It gives concrete shape to liberty by providing various means for personal expression. It enlivens democracy by enabling diverse groups to share in the ownership and use of goods.” (*Consumerism*, p. 90).

However, consumerism has a destructive legacy as well: “The satisfaction of immediate needs, for instance, has had the effect of quelling the desire to search for higher goals. It has obliterated a culture of constraint, just as it has often undermined communities of shared values and long-lasting commitments. Moreover, ‘affluence hardly encouraged introspection and self-cultivation’ (238). As consumerism, especially at century’s end, becomes an increasingly individualistic and private affair, we risk losing key virtues that stabilize and promote social life: care for others, compromise, friendship, responsibility to the past, and a felt obligation for the future” (*Consumerism*, p. 91).

3. The hymn says, “Bigger barns are what we need for our money, gadgets, more!” / Lord, we’re tempted to believe having wealth, we’ll be secure!” Compare Singleton’s observation on our false trust in consumption for security (of our self-image): “If we seek self-confidence with our tooth whitener or status with our automobile, it’s because that’s what we really want—namely, to purchase our self-image like a commodity” (*Consumerism*, p. 15).

The hymn also notes that our concern for security draws us away from helping our neighbors: “Can our bigger barns be good when poor neighbors know despair?”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.