

# Consumerism

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

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## STUDY GUIDES & LESSON PLANS

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### STUFF-LOVE

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

### MASTERING MAMMON

What did Jesus mean in the Sermon on the Mount when he declared, “You cannot faithfully serve both God and Money”? His teachings throughout the Gospels enable us to evaluate the consumer lifestyle.

### WHO ARE THE MEEK?

Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” What a fundamental paradox: Mammon is ours, the earth is ours, life is ours—if we return them to God! The poor, the lowly, and the despised are honored and welcome in the kingdom. The affluent are no less welcome, but they have to leave their baggage behind.

### DISCOVERING OUR TRUE IDENTITY

Consumerism can encourage the least attractive human traits—avarice, aggression, and self-centeredness. By giving us a new identity as members of God’s Body, the Eucharist can form us in fidelity, other-centeredness, and proper joy, which are counter-cultural to the ethos of consumer culture.

### MORE LIKE MEPHIBOSHETH

Consumerism, first and foremost, is a culture of expectation that erodes our ability to appreciate relationships, kindnesses, and other pleasures of life. We are trained to evaluate, inspect, and be suspicious that what is offered isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. Isn’t this mistrusting mindset exactly what the serpent exploited in Eden?

### BEYOND CANDY CANE LANE

Our Christmas cheer can quickly turn sour as mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, burgeoning debt, and an exhausting calendar of activities overwhelm us. How can we celebrate Christ’s birth with joyful simplicity that is much more than cutting back for the sake of cutting back?



# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**We must consume in order to live. Unfortunately, most of us also live to consume. Our habits of consumption, now all out of proportion to what we need to flourish as creatures made in the image of God, are distorting the character of our relationships with God and others.**

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**W**e live in a consumerist culture that draws us into unhealthy ways of relating to our material possessions, suggesting “an inordinate concern—some might even say an addiction—with the acquisition, possession and consumption of material goods and services,” writes Craig Gay. “Even more seriously, consumerism suggests a preoccupation with the immediate gratification of desire. It implies foolishness, superficiality and triviality, and the destruction of personal and social relationships by means of selfishness, individualism, possessiveness and covetousness.”†

Our excessive love of stuff is not merely a modern affliction, but an enduring addiction, Laura Singleton observes in *Stuff-Love* (p. 11). “Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet are in such a rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if expecting to stop living before they have relished them,” Alexis de Tocqueville noticed in the 1830’s. “This spectacle of restlessness amid abundance,” he wisely remarked, is “as old as the world; all that is new is to see a whole people performing it.” Indeed, restlessness amid abundance has the oldest pedigree—it’s what brought down Eden. Recognizing this, Singleton urges us to not make advertising or television a scapegoat for personal responsibility and even to be suspicious of “simplicity” as a marketing ploy.

The “lure of consumer culture is like a siren with many calls,” Barry Bryan writes in *Relationships in the Age of Consumerism* (p. 27). We are tempted toward compulsive busy-ness and distorted values as “market-



driven forces are usurping roles once assumed by families, friends, and communities in providing meaning in our lives." In *More Like Mephibosheth* (p. 39), Laura Singleton explores with wit and humor another siren call of consumerism, the call to exaggerated expectations "which can erode our ability to appreciate relationships, kindnesses, and other pleasures of life. We are trained to evaluate, inspect, and be suspicious that what is offered isn't all that it's cracked up to be."

Craig Blomberg's *Mastering Mammon* (p. 19) applies Jesus' teachings to the consumer lifestyle. "Just what did he mean in the Sermon on the Mount when he declared, 'You cannot faithfully serve both God and Money'?" Blomberg asks, and he mines the Gospels for their answers. Arthur Simon explores a related theme of Jesus' great sermon in *The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth* (p. 65). We affluent Christians consider so little the suffering of others, but "What would happen if we really became meek?" Simon wonders. "What if we showed extravagant generosity with God's gifts to us? How much more empowered our lives and the mission of the church would be. And how much less suffering the world would have."

We take a fresh look at the Gospels' teaching on avarice through the artistry of J.M.W. Turner's *Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple* (p. 48) and Guercino's *The Betrayal of Christ* (p. 46). Heidi Hornik finds the dramatically changing Christian attitudes about money in the sixteenth century are reflected in Marinus van Reymerswaele's *Money-Changer and His Wife* (p. 44). Though he approves of the new financial professionals, Marinus offers a subtle warning: what we choose to do with money in a consumer culture makes noticeable differences in our lives.

"Consumerism...encourages the least attractive human traits—avarice, aggression, and self-centeredness," says Mark Medley in *Discovering Our True Identity* (p. 32). But as we worship together in the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, we can be shaped in fidelity, other-centeredness, and proper joy, which are counter-cultural to this ethos of consumerism. "As often as we eat the bread and drink from the cup, Augustine reminds us, we receive the mystery of ourselves."

"The consumer religion coaches us...to hoard our resources, to keep for ourselves, to value personal comfort above service and accumulation over sacrifice," we confess in Ann Bell's worship service (p. 54) before sharing the Eucharist; yet God has "shown us another way in the life and teachings of Jesus, in his death and resurrection." That we, in observing the Supper, will be shaped in resistance to consumerist desires is a theme in Terry York's new hymn, *O God, You Own a Thousand Hills* (p. 51). "Forgive all love and grace misspent, forgive our resource wasting," he implores God, "Give to our worldly appetites, your simple meal for tasting."

Many complain that consumerism is spoiling the Christmas holiday. Rather than a joyous celebration of the Savior's birth, it's become a morass

of mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, and burgeoning debt. Matthew Schobert's *Beyond Candy Cane Lane* (p. 76) recommends shopping subversively (for fair trade goods) and returning our festivities to their true context in the church calendar. A simpler celebration doesn't have to be drudgery, Katie Cook says in *From Francis to Fezziwig* (p. 71). In Francis of Assisi, the curiously merry saint of carefree radical poverty, and Dickens' loveable character Fezziwig, "we glimpse the joy to which our Lord calls us: they loved people and friendship and good company." Indeed, like Jesus, "they knew how to celebrate without shutting their eyes to the terribly real pain all around them."

Resisting our obsession to consume goods will not be easy in the television age, when ads unrelentingly encourage us to buy, buy, buy. Yet "we can respond to TV's seductive values not only with the 'off' button, but by putting the TV in its place and actively talking back to the tube," Brett Dewey counsels in *Talking Back to the Tube* (p. 61).

Consumerism's legacy is mixed, Norman Wirzba realizes in a review article, *Curing Our Affluenza* (p. 89). Gary Cross's *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* shows consumerism "has provided status and freedom to some people, but has not been successful in treating change and uncertainty, inequality and division." The cure, suggested in Arthur Simon's *How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* and editor Michael Schut's *Simpler Living Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective*, "is not a call to dour asceticism, but rather an invitation to joy, to receive God's extravagant grace."

Our issue includes a confession and a caution. "What we tend to hear from church leaders, denominational study groups, and ethicists, or rather, what we *want* to hear from them, are moralistic critiques targeting individuals: if only we were less materialistic, families made better choices, and individuals lived more simply, everyone would be happier and society would be healthier," writes Barry Harvey in *Which Kingdom?* (p. 83). But three recent books—Philip Kenneson's *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community*, Michael Budde's *The (Magic) Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries*, and Budde and Robert Brimlow's *Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business is Buying the Church*—agree "the church itself is perpetuating profligate habits of consumption." At stake in the confrontation between consumerism and the body of Christ is nothing less than "the continued existence of the church as faithful witness to the mission and character of God, and with it the capacity to think, imagine, desire, and act in ways formed by the biblical story." ✠

## NOTES

1 Craig M. Gay, "Sensualists Without Heart," in Rodney Clapp, ed., *The Consuming Passion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 21.

2 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer and Max Lerner, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 508-509.

# Stuff-Love

BY LAURA SINGLETON

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. Why are we unable to rein in our greed?

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A European observer summed up with a certain amazement the insatiable drive for consumption he witnessed during a visit to the United States: “Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet are in such a rush to snatch any that come within their reach, as if expecting to stop living before they have relished them. They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight.”<sup>1</sup>

Did he make his trip during the dot-com boom of the late 1990s in Silicon Valley? The Reagan-inspired “Greed is good” Wall Street run of the mid-1980s? The flourishing post-war prosperity and Madison Avenue heyday of the 1950s? The feel-good expansiveness of the Roaring ‘20s? Sorry, wrong century!

Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous Frenchman who penned these words, visited America in the 1830s, before Ivory Soap floated or Tony the Tiger growled his first “GR-R-R-eat!”, before McDonald’s had “served” even one of those billions and billions of burgers, let alone cranked out a Happy Meal, and before any of the many Pepsi Generations later embodied by Britney had seen the light of day. The timing illustrates that the phenomenon of rampant American consumerism, despite current rhetoric, has deep-seated roots. As de Tocqueville acknowledges, its beginnings preceded his day as well.

“At first sight,” he writes, “there is something astonishing in this spectacle of so many lucky men restless in the midst of abundance. But it is a spectacle as old as the world; all that is new is to see a whole people performing it.”<sup>2</sup>

Restlessness amid abundance, after all, isn’t a bad way to characterize the attitude that brought down Eden. “There is nothing new under the sun,” the saying goes, which also reminds us of the signature phrase in Ecclesiastes. That book, along with the life of Solomon itself, certainly proves that ancients didn’t hesitate to test the rewards of materialism to find happiness “under the sun.” The prophets spend at least as much time chastising Israel for acquisitiveness as for idolatry—debunking in the process the tendency of current environmentalists to equate nature religions with earth-healthy consumption habits and blame our ecological sins on those Johnny-come-lately, patriarchal monotheists. Stuff-love, in fact, seems 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.

#### **HAZARDOUS TO OUR HEALTH**

Ancient though the problem may be, advancements in our technology for consuming make current levels of consumption, by Americans in particular and the developed world overall, even more hazardous than in the past. In 1830 we gobbled up the virgin forest with axes, human hands and backs (including immigrant or enslaved labor, of course), and horse-carts or oxen. Today, our weapons of choice include bio-engineered agricultural mutants, nuclear reactors, multiple motorized (and fossil-fuel-powered) vehicles and tools, plus an ever-expanding array of persistent and deadly chemicals, giving us the power to inflict much more rapid and insidious damage. In literature on the by-products of our selfish habits, this overblown consumption is projected as a culprit in environmental ills from global warming to species extinction. On a purely financial basis, higher and higher personal spending, including the service of consumer debt, drains disposable income that might otherwise contribute to social needs like healthcare and education.

The favored scapegoat for this overheated consumption engine, of course, is business. Increasingly, reproach is visited on the free-market system itself, particularly in combination with American ideals of personal advancement and growth. The fabled “Protestant work ethic,” it seems, has been superseded by an equally dutiful drive to consume for the sake of economic growth, an impulse no longer checked by whatever religious moorings exerted at least some influence in earlier eras. Keeping the economy expanding, of course, is the mechanism that enabled so many Americans to attain a higher standard of living than their parents. Who

knew that the growth machine might threaten the ability of one's great-great-grandchildren to live, period?

Even academics in the fields of business and economy, generally bastions of defense for free-market concepts, are becoming heralds of concern. Harvard economist Juliet Schor, one of the most prolific writers on patterns of American over-consumption, points out that the traditional "utility theory," which is used to justify market systems as inevitable maximizers of good, breaks down if consumers strive after ever-higher, unattainable standards of material wealth, leaving themselves chronically unsatisfied.<sup>3</sup> (More stuff may make us happier for a while, she says, but when our desires catch up and outstrip what we can afford to buy, we're stuck in unhappiness.) Since, she argues, this is in fact the situation for present-day Americans, we are not necessarily "better off" just because the economy is expanding. Business school faculty, who might not be expected to weigh in on the hazards of out-of-control individual consumption, realize the threat posed by the manifestation of that behavior in *particular* individuals—namely, corporate CEOs. Business academics know that confidence in markets depends upon confidence in their fair and unimpeded operation, and the latest scandals have revealed a system of corporate governance with limited accountability and seemingly limitless potential for exploitation by those at the top. Legal remedies can only go so far, and many perceive a need for real changes in the attitudes and assumptions common to many corporate leaders. Accordingly, you have articles like "Beyond Selfishness" in last fall's *MIT Sloan Management Review*, co-authored by an international triumvirate of business faculty representing Harvard, Oxford, and McGill Universities. They challenge contemporary truisms like trickle-down economics and the sanctity of building shareholder value, arguing that human relationships and social conscience must have their place in business decision-making. The collapse of communism, they argue, should not leave the opposing camp triumphant: "If capitalism stands only for individualism, it will collapse too."<sup>4</sup>

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**MODERN AFFLICTION OR ENDURING ADDICTION?**

With distress, scolding, and tons of constructive advice raining down on us from the experts, however, why are we consumers—whether afflu-

ent CEOs or average Americans—generally unable to rein in our greed? The search for answers to that question in our day has spawned a barrage of lawsuits attempting to find someone (preferably with deep pockets) to blame for the adverse outcomes of our bad choices in consumption, from cigarettes to fast food. The common enemy is usually advertising, elevated to a power of otherworldly stature, a very demon that has seduced us,

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**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. We can't put all the blame for this on the advertisers.**

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dragging innocent, duped Americans unwillingly into the abyss of consumerism. Without such influences, apparently, we'd all be content to live like the Amish. Writes one environmentalist: "It has taken relentless, well-crafted persuasion—and occasional coercion—to override the common values of frugality and sharing."<sup>5</sup> Most anyone

who's seen two-year-olds play, however, knows that coercion generally must be applied to *induce* sharing, not the other way around. One can only marvel at how the brilliant advertising elite managed to eradicate those "common values" so quickly in pre-literate toddlers.

Not everyone, in fact, tries to pin all the blame for excessive consumerism on outside influences. The book *Affluenza*, despite naming the consumer bug so it sounds like something you "catch," actually begins its section on causes for the virus with a chapter titled, yes, "Original Sin," discussing the Judeo-Christian perspective, among others, that finds selfish desires rooted in the human heart. Even author Richard Dawkins, an adherent to "orthodox Darwinian theory" (his term) finds enough evidence to posit an original cause for those desires in *The Selfish Gene*. Natural selection, he argues, favors the selfish individuals in any species, and thus the ones who are out for themselves are the ones still around to pass their chromosomes along to those who come later. From Dawkins' perspective, of course, this is all just a naturally-explainable phenomenon written into our DNA, but it seems rather like a case of a "rose by another name."

Does our disposition toward selfishness, however it got there, absolve advertisers who practice conscious deception? Of course not. Do they sometimes employ tactics for targeting and persuasion that, while short of outright deceit, stretch ethical standards? Yes, indeed. However, the reality is that advertisements work because they exploit something that is in us already and can be exploited. James Twitchell puts this argument clearly in his book, *Lead Us Into Temptation*: "The academy has casually passed off as



'hegemonic brainwashing' what seems, to me at least, a self-evident truth about human nature. We like having stuff."<sup>6</sup> Twitchell, while recognizing all the persuasive tactics employed by modern advertising, rejects the often-drawn distinction between "real" and "false" needs (the latter being the kind typically alleged to result from manipulative ads). From his perspective, all material needs beyond mere subsistence are by definition "wants." You can't have a "false want," because its legitimacy is defined by the act of wanting itself. 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. We can't put all the blame for this on the advertisers.

Our innate disposition toward wanting and consuming becomes even more evident when we examine popular plans for reducing consumption, which themselves seem suspiciously "stuff-like." The whole "simplicity" movement has spawned its own line of books and magazines, as publishers and advertisers always recognize a niche market when they see one. A summer issue of *Real Simple* (cover price \$3.95) featured an advertisement for a Toyota mini-van on the back, while *Organic Style* (cover price \$4.50) sported a similar ad for a Subaru Forester. Elaine St. James' series of books on "living the simple life" constitutes a classic franchise, offering brand extensions that would be the envy of any product manager at Procter & Gamble. The book *Affluenza*, itself first a documentary series aired on PBS, pokes fun at its own expense with a cartoon of a viewer watching the show and intently taking in its messages about American over-consumption. His response to the obligatory "For a tape of this program, send check or money order to..." promotional announcement is to pop up eagerly and say, "I'll need two!"<sup>7</sup> And, yes, there is a *Frugal Living for Dummies*, the unmistakable stamp of a trend whose time has come. Among the helpful hints on its front cover "pocket card": Go for basic cable rather than premium.

#### **A HIDDEN DANGER**

All of the foregoing, of course, illustrates what anti-consumption advocates are up against. Most Americans, to be blunt, like the lifestyle we have. As an illustration, one writer said she took an informal poll of female friends and family about whether they would be willing to give up the fossil-fuel-consuming, chemically-enhanced conveniences of modern life and go back to the soap-making, water-hauling, wood-chopping realities that chained women to the home and shaped our great-grandmothers' way of life. Given several options to choose from, one of her friends preferred "instant death" over the prospect of turning back the clock.<sup>8</sup> Anti-consumption advocates realize they are swimming against a powerful tide. An action group called "Enough" acknowledges that a major challenge for them is "how to sell the message about the negative impact [of our patterns of excessive consumption] on workers' lives, the environment and the Third

World, without wearing a hair shirt.”<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, an anonymous reviewer of one of St. James’ books at the Barnes and Noble website made this enthusiastic recommendation: “If you are looking to simplify and make some quality of life changes but are not necessarily ready to buy everything in bulk and shop only at thrift stores, this is the book for you.” Underneath it all, the comfortable-enough-to-be-popular message to simplify

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**Neither unbridled asceticism nor unbridled acquisition is a proper response to the challenges of consumerism. God, after all, created much stuff for us to enjoy, pronouncing it “good” when the work of creation was finished.**

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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.”

For those really taking the plunge into the rustic life, there’s also some danger that such deliberate countercultural downshifting can turn into its own form of self-indulgence. Bill

McKibben, in an essay contemplating why he opposed even an environmentally-friendly method of delivering his community from the summer menace of black flies, writes about this reverse consumptive behavior. “I consume inconvenience, turning it into a pleasurable commodity; it becomes the fuel for my own sense of superiority,” observes McKibben. Much as the new magazines and books illustrate, this consciousness is just another version of consumers banding into a lifestyle category. “Instead of defining ourselves by what we buy,” he suggests, “we define ourselves by what we throw away.”<sup>10</sup>

As many a monk finds out, even asceticism carries the hazards of pride and the potential for corruption by our selfish motives. This is partly because, as writer Martin Marty notes, “To disdain what is on earth to be consumed is not purely and simply virtuous.”<sup>11</sup> Marty illustrates this point with a traditional Hasidic story about a man who takes a vow of asceticism, believing that depriving himself of all earthly pleasures is a sure ticket to Paradise. He eschews art, social events, wine, women, song, and the like, and does achieve his desired after-life destination. Unfortunately, he is tossed out of Paradise in three days because he doesn’t have a clue about the delight and enjoyment that’s going on there.

Neither unbridled asceticism nor unbridled acquisition is a proper response to the challenges of consumerism. God, after all, created much stuff for us to enjoy, pronouncing it “good” when the work of creation was finished. On the other hand, God commanded limits on our possessiveness. The forbidden fruit itself was both edible and delicious, but God placed it beyond the boundary of our appropriate gathering.



As Christians, our challenge is to understand those appropriate boundaries on our consumption while accepting the reality that life under grace gives us no easy place to check for “rules.” The church can present invaluable opportunities to explore these concerns and solutions with one another. Tellingly, the “voluntary simplicity” movement has at its core a “small group” component, offering the kind of emotional support for constructive life change that churches, at their best, provide.

### **CHANGE WON'T BE EASY**

The fundamental requirement for fixing over-heated consumerism is to stop looking for others to blame and accept responsibility for ourselves. Even then, however, history suggests that change won't be easy.

Sometime in the late 300s, the great Christian leader St. John Chrysostom preached to his congregation in Antioch a series of seven sermons on the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The truths he stressed reflect issues that still plague our thinking about materialism. He challenged, for example, the fallacy that health and wealth are signs of God's favor, reminding hearers that lasting rewards (and punishment) come hereafter. Over sixteen centuries later, his description of the Rich Man's easy life offers a strong caution to contemporary Americans: “Everything flowed to him as from a spring...he was drowned every day by the waves of evil and did not take notice of it.”<sup>12</sup> This alone should warn us away from piecemeal approaches to reducing consumption that keep us safely in our “comfort zone” but clearly offer no comfort about our ultimate security. Unfortunately, even such powerful preaching apparently had a limited impact, as, by the seventh sermon, Chrysostom found it necessary to begin with a caustic preamble. He was quite upset, it seemed, at the report that so many church members were back out cheering the chariots at the local race track!

The story only illustrates that no amount of scolding, even from the preacher called the “golden mouth,” will change our behavior if we don't want to be changed. This prompts us to recognize the parallel: Though advertisers should of course be held accountable for deceit and pressure tactics, it remains true that the most persuasive commercial, be it ever so subtle, can't ultimately make us do something we don't want to do either.

### **NOTES**

1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer and Max Lerner, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 508.

2 *Ibid.*, 509.

3 Juliet Schor, “What's Wrong With Consumer Society? Competitive Spending and the 'New Consumerism,’” in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999), 49.

4 Henry Mintzberg, Robert Simons, and Kunal Basu, “Beyond Selfishness,” *MIT Sloan*

*Management Review* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2002), 69.

5 Stephanie Mills, "Can't Get That Extinction Crisis Out of My Mind," in *Consuming Desires*, 203.

6 James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 273.

7 Joel Pett, cartoon in preface to *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, by John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2001), xiii.

8 Jane Smiley, "It All Begins with Housework," in *Consuming Desires*, 168.

9 John Desmond, *Consuming Behaviour* (Basingstoke, England and New York: Palgrave, 2003), 91.

10 Bill McKibben, "Consuming Nature," in *Consuming Desires*, 92.

11 Martin E. Marty, "Equipoise," in *Consuming Desires*, 184.

12 St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, translated and introduced by Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, N Y: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 131.

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# Mastering Mammon

BY CRAIG L. BLOMBERG

**“What would Jesus do?” is a question many Christians are asking these days, but rarely do we apply it to the consumer lifestyle. An even more important question is “What did Jesus teach?” Just what did he mean in the Sermon on the Mount when he declared, “You cannot faithfully serve both God and Money”?**

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**D**o you suffer from “affluenza”? “Affluenza is the contagious, addictive virus that makes us believe that too much is not enough. That transforms us from ‘citizens’ into ‘consumers.’ That prompts political leaders of all persuasions to beg, ‘Buy something, buy anything.’”<sup>1</sup> John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor’s *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, offers a self-examination to determine how sick with the illness we are! Questions include, “Do you get bored unless you have something to consume (goods, food, media)?” “Do you ever use shopping as ‘therapy?’” “Do you personally fill more than one large trash bag in a single week?” “Does each person in your house or apartment occupy more than 500 square feet of personal space?” “Are any of your credit cards maxed out?” along with many others.<sup>2</sup>

## **WHAT DID JESUS TEACH?**

“What would Jesus do?” is a question that many Christians are asking these days, but rarely do they apply it to the consumer lifestyle. An even more important question is “What did Jesus teach?” What is already clear from Scripture about his views on material possessions, or “mammon”? Just what did he mean in the Sermon on the Mount when he declared, “You cannot faithfully serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24)?<sup>3</sup>

In his great sermon, Jesus already had stressed that his followers should not store up treasures for themselves on earth but in heaven (6:19-

21) and explained that they should not worry about the basic necessities of life. God, after all, knows exactly what we need (6:25-34). Tucked into this discussion, however, is an often misunderstood verse: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (6:33). Is this merely a guarantee of material prosperity in a life to come? Mark 10:29-30 suggests not. There Jesus promises those who have abandoned family or property for discipleship "a hundred times as much *in this present age*: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields." Clearly the way believers receive back a hundred (or more) times as many family members is through their new, large Christian family. The way we have our material needs met must therefore be the same—as fellow Christians share with those who are in need. It is significant, back in Matthew 6:33, that the commands and pronouns are plural—"y'all seek...and these things will be given to y'all" (as our Southern friends would say). Precisely when the church as a whole strives to implement the justice on earth that matches God's will, then they will help the most materially needy in their midst. Matthew 6:33 must be understood corporately, not individually; otherwise countless faithful Christians who have starved to death over the centuries have massively disproved Jesus' words!

Several parables of Jesus speak directly to our theme as well. The three most important are the rich fool, the rich man and Lazarus, and the unjust steward, all distinctive to Luke's Gospel. At first glance it appears that the rich fool (Luke 12:16-20) is condemned simply for being rich. This is the man who discovered, to his surprise, a bumper crop of grain at harvest time and had to build bigger barns in order to store it all. But that night he died in an act of judgment from God. On closer examination, it is interesting to see that the story reflects an entirely self-centered perspective: "I will do this" and "I will do that." In first-century Israel, 70-80% of the people eked out a marginal existence with little surplus for the future; anyone experiencing such a wonderful harvest would have been expected to share with the "neighborhood." The larger context of the parable confirms our suspicion. Verses 13-15 show that Jesus is warning against "greed" (or "covetousness"), not the mere accumulation of possessions, while verse 21 shows that this man was not "rich toward God"—he had no relationship with the Lord of the universe. But it remains a telling point that the way his spiritual condition is disclosed is through his uncaring hoarding of riches.

The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) reinforces this point even more provocatively. Here there is nothing explicitly in the text or its context to prove that the rich man is not being condemned simply for his great wealth or that Lazarus is not being rewarded in the afterlife simply for being poor. Verse 25 comes very close to affirming precisely those two claims. Yet it remains interesting that Lazarus is the only character in any

of Jesus' forty-or-so parables to be named, and the meaning of the Hebrew *Eleazar* (from which the Greek *Lazarus* is derived) is "God helps." The most famous Eleazar in Bible times was, tellingly, Abraham's pious servant. So Lazarus is probably meant to represent the pious poor, the faithful Jews who turned to God as their only hope. The same concept lies behind the beatitude, "Blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6:20). The rich man, on the other hand, pleads that someone would return from the land of the dead to warn his brothers so that they will repent (16:30). This strongly suggests that this rich man in Hades knew he had never truly repented and cultivated a relationship with God. But it remains striking that this is demonstrated through his utter neglect of a poor beggar on his very doorstep whom he was in a position to help on a daily basis.

The account of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-9) may be the strangest of Jesus' parables. The master praises his corrupt servant not for his injustice but for his shrewdness (16:8a). Ironically, unbelievers are often more clever in their use of money to serve their own ends than believers are in Christian arenas (16:8b). Jesus, therefore, commands his followers to use "worldly wealth" (a stock expression like our "filthy lucre" that does not mean strictly ill-gotten gain but the wealth of this world of any origin) for kingdom interests—to gain and nurture more disciples so that those who precede us into heaven can warmly welcome us when we arrive there as well (16:9). Verses 10-12 then reiterate in three different ways that, as one demonstrates faithfulness with the material possessions of this life, one can be entrusted with true, spiritual riches as well. As in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus concludes by reminding people, in a world familiar with slavery, that one can ultimately serve only one full-time master. And if that master is "mammon," it cannot also be God!

Many readers of the Gospels have stumbled over Jesus' famous encounter with the rich young ruler. In what seems to be his most extreme teaching on divesting oneself of possessions, Jesus commands that "seeker" to "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). We naturally

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**In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus is warning against "greed," not the mere accumulation of possessions. This man was not "rich toward God"—he had no relationship with the Lord of the universe. But it remains a telling point that the way his spiritual condition is disclosed is through his uncar- ing hoarding of riches.**

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wonder if Jesus is commanding us to do something equally extreme. It is Luke again who points us in the direction of an answer. Luke not only includes an account of the dialogue between Jesus and the ruler (Luke 18:18-30) but then, after a short interval, adds the story of Zacchaeus (19:1-10) and the parable of the pounds (19:11-27). Zacchaeus repented by voluntarily giving up a little over half of his wealth, while the good servants

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**The question for Jesus' followers is never how many possessions they own but how they are using them; if not in God's service, then their "mammon" remains in Satan's domain. How one ultimately deals with "affluenza" will reveal if one's profession of Christian faith is genuine or not.**

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in the parable are praised because they invested their master's money and made more! It is as if Luke wanted deliberately to juxtapose diverse models for being a good steward. Neither Jesus nor any other New Testament writer ever commands believers to give a fixed percentage of their income to "the Lord's work," as we would call it today.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the rich young ruler is the only person in all of Scripture who is ever com-

manded to sell all that he has! At the same time, Robert Gundry overstates himself only a little when he proclaims, "That Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he *would* issue that command!"<sup>5</sup>

Jesus himself looked material temptation squarely in the eye when the devil offered him all the kingdoms of the world in return for serving him (Matthew 4:8-9; Luke 4:5-7). The question for Jesus' followers is never how much personal property or possessions they own but how they are using them; if not in God's service, then their "mammon" remains at least implicitly in Satan's domain. Jesus' parable of the sower likens one of the unfruitful seeds to those who "hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word" (Mark 4:18b-19a). How one ultimately deals with "affluenza" will reveal if one's profession of Christian faith is genuine or not. The twin parables of the hidden treasure and pearl of great price (Matthew 13:44-46) teach that the kingdom is so valuable that one must sacrifice whatever God may require in order to obtain it. Compare the teaching of Jesus after two other little parables on counting the cost, the tower builder and warring king (Luke 14:28-32): "those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples" (14:33). Here the verb "give up" could also be translated "renounce." Jesus is not necessarily teaching that we divest

ourselves of all of our property, but that we renounce our spiritual claim to possessing it. When we recognize that all that we “own” is really on loan from God and commit to using all of it in his service, consistent with his kingdom priorities, then we may truly be said to have renounced our possessions.

### **JESUS’ CONCERN FOR THE POOR**

Jesus was very concerned for the materially poor of this world. We have already noted how Jesus’ Great Sermon in Luke begins with his blessing the poor. Matthew’s version, “Blessed are the poor in Spirit” (Matthew 5:3), does not contradict this, because the underlying Hebrew term common in the poetry and prophets of the Old Testament (the *anawim*) means those who are *both* materially impoverished *and* spiritually dependent on God. To those with surplus possessions, Christ goes on to command, “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:42). Augustine astutely observed, as long ago as the fifth century, that the text says “give to everyone that asks,” not “give everything to him that asks” (*De Sermone Domine en Monte*, 67). When we have reason to believe that a handout will allow certain beggars to feed various addictions, we do better to point them to a rehab facility. But, whatever the precise meaning, Jesus assumes his followers will continue to “give alms,” or donate significant sums of money to mechanisms for truly helping the poor, and that in doing so, they will not be motivated by the desire for human acclaim but will be content with God’s praise (Matthew 6:1-4).

In his famous Nazareth “manifesto” (Luke 4:16-21), Jesus summed up a large portion of his ministry with the text from Isaiah 61:1-2, including the fact that good news was being preached to the poor (4:18). This comes in the context of his proclaiming freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed. Throughout his ministry, Jesus did all of these things for people suffering these literal afflictions, so it will not do to “spiritualize” the poor and assume Jesus is referring only to those who recognize their spiritual poverty. He expects his followers to do something about their material needs as well. Indeed, at the end of his public teaching ministry, he returns to this theme in equally pointed fashion. Those who will be allowed to enter his presence for eternity are those who have helped the materially needy, especially fellow Christian brothers and sisters, with their acute physical needs, thereby demonstrating true discipleship (Matthew 25:31-46).

### **WHAT SHOULD WE DO?**

As Jesus began to predict his upcoming arrest, torture, and crucifixion, he summarized the two options given to all people. To all his present and would-be followers, he explained, “Those who would be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who



want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" (Mark 8:34b-36). Clearly Jesus is playing on the word "life" — one may have to abandon one's physical life in order to gain eternal, spiritual, resurrection life.

Yet Jesus is not a consistent ascetic; his message is not strictly one of self-denial. Indeed, some who were more ascetic than Jesus caricatured him as "a glutton and a drunkard" because of his regular partying with the

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**The moneychanging was in the one place that non-Jewish worshipers could pray, and the commotion made their worship impossible. The application of Jesus' temple-clearing is not to mandate what can or can't be sold in a church building but the more difficult issue of when we allow church to be turned into a business in ways that compromise worship.**

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outcasts of his society. On one specific occasion, he lavished praise on a close friend, Mary of Bethany, even though she spent a year's worth of her income on a jar of perfume which she used to "anoint" Jesus in preparation for his burial (John 12:1-8; compare Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9). Part of Jesus' reply to those who criticized Mary's behavior, unfortunately, has often been misconstrued. "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me" (12:8). Tak-

en out of context, this has sounded to many throughout church history as if caring for the poor was *not* one of Jesus' priorities. But we have already seen enough other texts that make this conclusion impossible. Rather, Jesus is alluding to Deuteronomy 15:11, which promises there will always be poor people in the land, but then immediately goes on to conclude, "Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards those of your people who are poor and needy in your land." Yet when our consistent approach to life is to be generous in giving to help meet the needs of the poor, we can in good conscience occasionally "splash out" in celebrations, especially when they too have important ministry components—the special, costly church program or a nice vacation that incorporates ministry as well as tourism, to give two contemporary examples.

One final set of passages from the Gospels that addresses our theme of "mastering mammon" comes from Jesus' ministry in the temple during the last week of his life. Jesus' famous "temple cleansing" (Mark 11:15-19; Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-48; and John 2:13-17) is better described as his



“temple clearing”! Later rabbinic sources would describe how the high priest, Caiaphas, had only recently moved the site of buying and selling sacrificial animals and moneychanging from the Kidron Valley outside the temple precincts to the Court of Gentiles within those precincts. But that was exactly the one place that Gentile God-fearers, the non-Jewish worshippers of the God of Israel, could pray and meditate, and now the ruckus and commotion there made their worship impossible. The application of this incident for today is not to mandate what can or can’t be sold in a church building but the much broader and more difficult issue of when we allow church to be turned into a business in ways that compromise the centrality of worship. Appropriately, one of Jesus’ final teachings before leaving the temple for the last time was to contrast the ostentatious donations to its treasury by the local aristocrats (some of whom had acquired their wealth by exploiting the poor—Mark 12:40) with the poor widow, whose “two very small copper” coins represented “all she had to live on” (12:41-44).

This last passage is one of several biblical texts that have suggested to thoughtful Christians that perhaps the “New Testament model” for Christian giving today is not the “flat tax” of a tithe, or ten-percent, for everyone. (Even in Jesus’ day, the triple tax of the Old Testament was interpreted in such a way that Jews gave 23 1/3% annually for the temple treasury, not to mention additional Roman taxes that varied widely but could easily have raised the entire responsibility of a faithful Jew to pay well over 30% of his total income to either Jerusalem or Rome.) Instead, Jesus and the apostles appear to have endorsed the principle not of equal amounts or equal percentages of giving but of equal sacrifice. In most circumstances this principle suggests what has been called the “graduated tithe”—the more one makes, the higher percentage one gives to the Lord’s work.<sup>6</sup> As Linda Belleville explains in the context of commenting on 2 Corinthians 8:11-15, another key text on our topic, “Whereas a fixed 10 percent would most likely be negligible for someone with an income of \$100,000, it could well cripple a person with an income of \$10,000.” This also accords with Jesus’ teaching in Luke 12:48 that “we are responsible in direct proportion to how God has blessed us.”<sup>7</sup>

Once we decide how much we are willing to give, we must then direct our funds wisely. Hopefully, we choose our churches at least in part on the fact that they apply biblical concepts of stewardship thoughtfully. But even the most generous American churches still spend a considerable majority of the money they take in on themselves—their staff, facilities, and programs. So-called “missions budgets,” in especially generous congregations, may range between ten and twenty percent, but seldom more than half of that ever leaves the United States and an even smaller percentage goes to the “holistic” gospel of Jesus—meeting people’s most desperate physical as

well as spiritual needs—in the most impoverished and/or unevangelized parts of the world.<sup>8</sup> Obedient Christians will therefore give generously to their local congregation *and* donate perhaps an even larger sum to Christians and Christian organizations more directly involved in addressing the most acute needs of our global village. Then we may be able to claim that we have taken a few small steps along the road toward mastering mammon and curing affluenza.

## NOTES

1 David Wann, "Test tells us whether you have affluenza symptoms," *Denver Post* (Dec. 30, 2001), L-6.

2 John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2001).

3 All New Testament quotations in this article are from THE HOLY BIBLE: TODAY'S NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ®. Copyright © 2002 by International Bible Society. The Old Testament quotation comes from the NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION: INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE EDITION ®. Copyright © 1996 by International Bible Society. For full exegetical support of the positions taken in this article, see my *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1999; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 111-46. For a radically abbreviated version in a handbook for personal or group Bible study, see my *Heart, Soul, and Money: A Christian View of Possessions* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2000), 45-57.

4 Matthew 23:23 (like its parallel in Luke 11:42) does not contradict this, because there Jesus is telling *Jewish* leaders to continue obeying the Old Testament law of tithing. But after Jesus' death and resurrection, the civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament need no longer be literally obeyed.

5 Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 388.

6 See especially Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in An Age of Hunger*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Dallas: Word, 1997), 193-96.

7 Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 220.

8 The most up-to-date statistics on American Christian giving are found in the annual publications of John L. and Sylvia Ronsvalle of empty tomb, inc., in Champaign, IL. Most recently, see their *The State of Church Giving through 2000*, released in October 2002 and available on their website, [www.emptytomb.org](http://www.emptytomb.org).



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# Relationships in the Age of Consumerism

BY BARRY J. BRYAN

Glossy advertisements tempt us to see even personal and social relationships in selfish, individual, possessive, and covetous ways. Yet we find a contrasting message in the Bible and in the lives of those saints in this age of consumerism who live beyond appearance, beyond affluence, and beyond marketable achievement.

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With a bit of imagination we can begin to glimpse how consumerism is shaping our way of life, how it is tempting us to see personal and social relationships in selfish, individual, possessive, and covetous ways. Rather than seeing ourselves as students being mentored through a teacher's guidance, patients covenanting for a physician's care, children embracing a parent's nurture, or spouses growing into union with a lover's love, we are lured into seeing ourselves as consumers in all of our relationships, always looking ahead to the goods and services we've contracted for, but never getting enough.

I'll start close to home by imagining the lives of two university professors. The first one resides in a safe and nurturing community—a small town, urban suburb, or city neighborhood—in which she actually knows and interacts with her neighbors, and she enjoys teaching at the beautiful campus nearby. Because her career as a professor improves the community's future, it has great meaning for her and others. Her work is challenging, but it is rewarding to her intrinsically as well as financially. Her schedule leaves adequate time for her to enjoy her family and friends, and to pursue outside interests. Her few material possessions are of high quality and they easily satisfy her needs; as a result, her home is smaller in size

and less expensive to own. This professor is connected to her surroundings, rather than merely living or working in them, because she has a stake in the welfare of the community. She purchases the necessities of life from local businesses whose owners are known to her. By driving a simple, older vehicle, she preserves for herself the weeks or months that earning the thousands of after-tax dollars for a new car would take away from her each year. With this extra time, she explores the avocations and volunteer work that she really likes to do with her mind and hands.

The second university professor looks in the mirror each morning and worries, "Am I wealthy enough? Am I attractive enough? Am I successful enough? Am I famous yet?" He does not know that God loves him just as he is; the good news of God's generous care for us—"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow," Jesus proclaims to anxious consumers, "they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28b-29)—has not seeped deeply into his self-awareness. As the day unfolds, he falls into a compulsive behavior of constant busy-ness, arduously grasping for happiness that he never seems to find. He wishes he was a bit wealthier, a tad thinner, and had better skin tone so that he could wear more stylish clothing. Above all, he wants to be "successful," by which he means more recognized and appreciated for his contributions at the university. Ironically, though the professor cannot sense he has "made it," his students believe he is successful when he takes time to listen to them, celebrates their sports or cultural achievements, and generously helps them with their daily assignments or in preparing for exams. Why doesn't he "lighten up," his students wonder, for they know that he has already "made it," that he is at his best when he is simply nurturing their student-professor relationship.

The second professor is one I see in the mirror each morning. Like many Americans, I am too often distracted by the performance-based atmosphere of consumer culture, at the expense of becoming a better person. Though in more cynical moments we may tell ourselves that the lifestyle in the first scenario is not even possible, most of us harbor deeper dreams that are not so easily realized by making money or becoming successful. We want to live from wisdom, compassion, and freedom, not appearance, affluence, and achievement.

### **COMPULSIVE BUSY-NESS**

One day my student, Hall, came to the office and asked if I would look over his resumé. Inwardly I said to myself, "I'm too busy right now. Just leave it with me and I'll do it later. I am doing something much more important, writing a research paper." I'm not proud of this inner voice that lures me to remain compulsively busy, yet I have heard it often, for it indulges my fantasy that I can single-handedly ensure some "higher purpose" in my life. The good news, however, is that on this occasion I ig-

nored the call of compulsive busy-ness. Was my being busy really more important than a student who needed my advice and attention? After all, I encourage my students to stop by the office; I want them to feel welcome and comfortable when they see me there, around campus, or in the community. Making students feel welcome is often more important than matters related to the course I am teaching them. I want to be present to them in a kind and caring way. When Hall came into the office, I consciously turned away from the computer, faced him, and admired his enthusiasm for life and responded to his respect for my guidance. I took off my armor of being busy and listened to my student.

These few moments of listening to Hall might seem unremarkable. Neither the student newspaper nor student-run television news program will carry a headline: "Busy professor spends time with student." Yet in such a moment of listening to my student, I embrace God's purpose for my life at least as deeply as, and perhaps much more deeply than, in many other things I do. The purpose of our lives is not to be hurried and frantic, but rather is to be fully present to the people and situations we encounter in ways that are wise, compassionate, and free.

#### **DISTORTED VALUES**

Though glossy advertisements are promoting modern myths such as "Material possessions will make you happy," often at the expense of developing meaningful personal relationships with God and with other people, the Bible offers a contrasting message that won't die with fads. The Apostle Paul knew that wealth, being physically attractive, success, and fame are not the secrets to contentment. "In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and being in need," he declares. "I can do all things

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**The need for love and acceptance is crucial in all human relationships, yet this "unconditional love is a priceless gift that money cannot buy." Unfortunately, what money cannot buy, our consumerist hearts cannot properly value.**

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through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:12b-13). About the temporal nature of material possessions, he observes: "for we brought nothing into the world, so that we cannot take anything out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (1 Timothy 6:7-9).

The need for love and acceptance is crucial in all human relationships, yet this "unconditional love is a priceless gift that money cannot buy"

Tonya Stoneman reminds us in “Countering Consumerism.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, what money cannot buy, our consumerist hearts cannot properly value. The Apostle realized that God can satisfy this need for undeserved and complete love, within all of our relationships, like nothing else.

Consumerism, by replacing our desire for healthy relationships with an artificial, insatiable search for things and the money to buy them, ironically shows little regard for the true utility of what is bought. For instance, it values family ties and friendship, but primarily as a rationale for buying ourselves the latest communication services, or (at best) as an opportunity for gift-giving. How we value every relationship becomes mediated through the spending of money on goods and services. Yet happiness can’t be purchased in the marketplace, no matter how hard advertising tries to convince us of it.

Market-driven forces are usurping roles once assumed by families, friends, and communities in providing meaning in our lives. Major life events, such as graduation or weddings, have been transformed into consumer events with their culturally-approved hierarchy of demands for things. These demands can assume a life of their own: salaries and job prestige after college graduation day, or the bride’s dress and the parties leading up to the wedding, often assume more significance than true career satisfaction or the bride’s and groom’s state of mind.

Despite these influences of the consumerist culture, many people continue to live with compassion. When a friend requires help, a child desires a hug, or a patient needs consoling, they rise to the occasion. In these moments they transcend consumerism and its definition of success.

This sort of humility and being there for others makes a person more attractive in human relationships. The individuals who are the most beautiful in my world are the people who live simply and wisely, frugally and compassionately, without any overshadowing need for acclaim or recognition. They live with a grace sufficient to each moment. They are the individuals to whom I turn when I need to talk to someone. They are truly saints in the age of consumerism because they live beyond appearance, beyond affluence, and beyond marketable achievement. I aspire to be this type of individual: this type of professor and colleague, this type of son and brother and uncle, and this type of friend.

### **RESISTING CONSUMERISM’S MANY LURES**

The cultural atmosphere of consumerism lures us into other “senseless and harmful” desires. Here we’ve reflected on its tempting call to compulsive busy-ness, but we might just as easily consider its enticement toward greed or envy. In *Living from the Center: Spirituality in the Age of Consumerism*, Jay McDaniel says the lure of consumer culture is like a siren with many calls.<sup>2</sup> Several of the ten temptations of consumerism that he lists tend to distort our relationships. We are swayed to believe that having a

successful career is more important than being a good parent, a considerate neighbor, or a kind and loving person, and to think that enjoying prosperity in the suburbs with a perfectly manicured lawn is the highest goal in life. We are persuaded to see the universe not as a communion of subjects, but rather as a collection of objects. And we are tempted to suppose we are entirely on our own, because there is no grace or ultimate mercy within the depths of things.

The first step in resisting consumerism's numerous allurements, McDaniel reminds us, is to recognize that these are enemies of our better selves and destructive of our communion with God and others. Then with a bit of imagination we can envision "healing alternatives": that living lightly on the earth and gently with each other is much more important than appearance, affluence, or achievement; being a good parent, neighbor, and colleague surpasses having a successful career; and doing truly good work is measured in service to others, which may be unnoticed, rather than in piling up money or wasting natural resources. And we will see that helping others and dwelling in solidarity with people in need is more important than prosperity in the suburbs.

Most importantly in my opinion, we must catch a vision of the universe as a place in which we are not on our own, dwelling among objects to manipulate, but as a community of subjects before God, whose grace nourishes all our relationships.

## NOTES

1 Tonya Stoneman, "Countering Consumerism," *IN TOUCH Magazine* (Atlanta: In Touch Ministries, March 1999), 2.

2 Jay McDaniel, *Living from the Center: Spirituality in the Age of Consumerism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press), 62.

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# Discovering Our True Identity

BY MARK S. MEDLEY

Consumerism, as a character-cultivating way of life, encourages the least attractive human traits—avarice, aggression, and self-centeredness. By giving us a new identity as members of God’s very Body, the Eucharist can form us in fidelity, other-centeredness, and proper joy, which are counter-cultural to the ethos of consumer culture. As often as we eat the bread and drink from the cup, Augustine reminds us, we receive the mystery of ourselves.

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Historian Lendol Calder recalls from college days this “icebreaker” event at a Christian camp. Campers, grouped by their nationalities, were asked to sing a song representing their culture to the rest of the assembly. Most groups quickly agreed on a song, usually an indigenous folk song, and were ready to perform in ten to twenty minutes. The lone group that had not accomplished this simple task was the Americans. They debated for an hour before they could settle on a song—Coca Cola’s jingle “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing.” These American college students were not bound together by patriotic tunes, folk melodies, or even Christian songs. They were united by commercial culture.

Calder’s memory is a disturbing story because it reveals consumerism to be an ethos, a character-cultivating way of life, a way of life that constructs or “sells” identity. It is a way of life that militates against Christian



virtues of love and joy, patience and contentedness, self-discipline and self-denial. But consumerism does so, writes Rodney Clapp, “with a velvet glove rather than an iron fist. It speaks in sweet and sexy tones rather than dictatorial ones, and it conquers by promises rather than threats.”<sup>1</sup>

Some features of consumer capitalism inevitably run counter to Christian discipleship. Yet in Christian communities we can resist and contest the ethos of consumer capitalism every time we receive the Eucharist.

### **CONSECRATED CONSUMERISM**

In a “postmodern” world that is characterized by emergence, novelty, contingency, and flux, we are constantly reshaping ourselves by how and what we consume. “Consumerism, that is the lifestyles and cultures structured around consumption, is a defining feature of the postmodern,” observes sociologist David Lyon in *Jesus in Disneyland*.<sup>2</sup> Advertising is a fundamental enterprise in our culture for generating and maneuvering markets. Ads orchestrate our desires as consumers and they provide us various identities to buy and sell.

In the United States, we now spend nearly six *trillion* dollars a year, most of it on consumer goods. For example, we spend more money on shoes, jewelry, and watches (\$80 billion) than on higher education (\$65 billion), and we’ve constructed over twice as many shopping centers as high schools.<sup>3</sup> “Shopping is the chief cultural activity in the US,” notes James Twitchell, with the shopping center supplanting the church building as a symbol of cultural values.<sup>4</sup> Megamalls, like The Mall of America in Minneapolis, are the great “cathedrals of consumerism” to which we make “pilgrimage” in order to practice our consumer religion.

As a character-cultivating way of life, consumerism encourages some of the least attractive human traits—avarice, aggression, and self-centeredness. Arguably, these traits have produced the highest standard of living in recorded history, but they are ultimately without a moral compass and threaten to undermine social order. More importantly, these traits, now lauded as virtues in our culture, are antithetical to the Christian way of life. Clearly, when our lives are greedily centered on competition and profits, this will destroy sacrifice, fidelity, patience, and contentment.<sup>5</sup>

*Consumerism* is much more than the mere creation and consumption of goods and services. Consumerism is kindled, according to sociologist Jean Baudrillard, only when people come to mythically believe they have certain “needs” that can only be satisfied through consumption. From that point, they need to need and desire to desire. Instead of consuming goods themselves, they consume the *meanings* of goods as those have been constructed through advertising and marketing. In a sense, they become what they buy. Consumers develop a sense of who they are and what they want to become through consumption, or “I consume, therefore, I am,” to adapt Descartes’ famous dictum. Rather than to keep up with the Joneses or the

Smiths in their neighborhoods, they consume to express personal style and taste. Hence, they do not merely buy goods and services for pleasure, but primarily “consumers identify their values and commitments by internalizing the symbolic meanings of commodities” they purchase.<sup>6</sup> They purchase Harley-Davidson motorcycles to symbolize personal freedom, Nike shoes to suggest “I want to be like Mike,” and clothing from Abercrombie and

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**Advertisements do not merely mirror our needs, desires, trends, or definitions of coolness and chicness; rather, we purchase the branded and packaged coolness constructed and marketed to us. “Being an individual” has been reduced to the ability to collect, organize, and consume commodities.**

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Fitch to communicate chic casualness. They embrace these “brands” to characterize their lifestyles, personal relationships, and self-images.

In constantly “trying on” new clothes and fashions, then, postmodern consumers are putting on new identities and fresh personalities. Indeed, “being an individual” has been reduced to the ability to collect, organize, and consume commodities.

Ironically, advertising, packaging, fashion, and branding so strongly influence the way consumers build up and maintain their identities, Twitchell suggests, they become fashioned or branded in the image and likeness of the commodities they purchase. Today’s commercials and advertisements do not merely mirror our needs, desires, trends, or definitions of coolness and chicness; rather, we purchase the branded and packaged coolness constructed and marketed to us.<sup>7</sup> “Merchants of Cool,” an enlightening yet profoundly disturbing PBS Frontline documentary, evidences this intentional “hocking” of identity. It reveals the convergence of advertising, marketing, and mass media—particularly television—in the selling of identity to young American adolescents.

#### **RECEIVING OUR IDENTITY IN THE EUCHARIST**

The church is both a servant and herald of the kingdom of God in the midst of other kingdoms and communities of the world that attempt to shape our understanding of reality and identity. The world often opposes, derides, ignores, or has other priorities than the kingdom of God. It is to the world’s kingdoms and communities that the church, as apostolic community, is sent.

Calling the church “apostolic” implies it is distinct from the world. It “is in the world but not of the world;” that is, the church is in the world geographically, historically, and culturally, yet it differs from the world

because the church takes its cues from Jesus Christ who has sent it out by the power of his Spirit. This points to a profound tension at the heart of being a Christian. The North American church today shares a common cultural identity with other North Americans. It is deeply rooted in its particular culture contexts; it shares the language as well as some of the values and practices of the culture in which it lives. At the same time, the church's loyalty to Jesus Christ leads it to embody an alternative vision of life that quite often conflicts with the surrounding culture. Christians are called to be distinctive by virtue of the biblical narrative that shapes their lives, to speak a different language and practice a different way of life. Therefore, the church must discriminate between the elements of culture that are neutral in value, those that can be positively affirmed, and those that must be criticized, resisted, and rejected.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of "consecrated consumerism" noted above, the contemporary North American church should reject the dominant values of today's culture of consumerism, commercialism, and commodification. It has resources for resisting the efforts of "consecrated consumerism" to construct and market certain identities for us to buy and wear. By participating in the practices of the church, the people of God, empowered by the Spirit, are formed to live the pattern of Jesus' life. We might examine various church practices, such as baptism, discernment, forgiveness, and hospitality, but I will explore the practice of the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper.

This is not to say that our church practice of the Supper is never co-opted or deformed by the very consumerist values we should be resisting. For instance, the apostle Paul rebukes some Christians at Corinth for showing "contempt for the church of God" when they "humiliate those who have nothing" by hoarding the whole of their common meal before the poorer members could gather (1 Corinthians 11:22). These who "eat and drink without discerning the body" and caring for its members, Paul says, "eat and drink judgment against themselves" (11:29). But when the Lord's Supper is consumed rightly, it bears the power to shape our identities anew.

The consumer of the Supper should be formed in habits, affections, and dispositions that are counter-cultural to the ethos of a consumer culture. How does eucharistic practice subvert the false identities and values marketed to us? By giving us a new identity as members of God's very Body. The practice of the Eucharist should cultivate fidelity, other-centeredness, and proper joy in the consumers of bread and cup at the table of great thanksgiving. As often as we eat the bread and drink from the cup, as Augustine reminds us, we receive the mystery of ourselves.

### **FIDELITY**

In the Eucharist, the triune God, who is eternally rich in love and fellowship, freely and graciously shares that life of love with humanity in

Jesus Christ. Sharing life with others, whatever the cost, is God's way of being.

The Eucharist cultivates in participants the virtue of fidelity, or faithfulness, grounded in the faithfulness of God toward us. In contrast, contemporary advertising cultivates not only a worship of unlimited choice but also a "paradoxical" loyalty to the transitory and fleeting. As consumers, we are, in short, encouraged to be deeply committed to being uncommitted. Consumerism encourages us to flit from one thing to another in the search for that "missing something." As a result, convictions and practices of faithfulness rarely get the chance to sprout, let alone thrive. Consider the value placed on disposability—the disposability of many products (eating utensils, razors, contact lenses, diapers) and "planned obsolescence" of other merchandise, the disposability of relationships (exhibited when we dissolve a marriage or drop a friendship if it no longer benefits us), and the disposability of churches (seen in jumping from one congregation to another when a congregation no longer fulfills our needs).

The Lord's Supper resists this commitment to being uncommitted by celebrating God's abiding and abundant presence. The practice of breaking bread and sharing cup together reminds the church that God is faithful to his promises, is faithful to humanity. And in performing the story of God's faithfulness, the Eucharist calls us to faithfulness. In an economy that lifts up the lack of fidelity as a virtue, we resist simply by abiding; and we learn how to abide before the Christ and others at the table.

### **OTHER-CENTEREDNESS**

We gather around the table in order to remember a story that counters self-interestedness and cultivates hospitality. In this way the Eucharist challenges our culture's narcissism, its temptation to guide all aspects of life by self-interest.

Consumerism encourages us to view others as commodities, as objects to be exploited for our benefit. It abusively turns the freedom of the market into a freedom from each other or a right to exploit one another for the sake of self. The Lord's Supper, however, reminds us that God's grace comes not only in the form of bread and wine, but also in the form of flesh and blood.

The people who gather around the table are the body of Christ as they bless, receive, and consume the elements. When we open our hands to God in Christ in order to receive the gift of grain and fruit, as well as the gift of our true identity, we must also open our hands to others. Otherwise, we do violence to the very life-giving mystery at the heart of the church's life.<sup>9</sup>

So, the practice of table feasting and "facing" cultivates a way of life that resists the commodification of our relationships. The Eucharist schools us in the art of paying attention to others; it draws the focus away from ourselves and redirects it toward God, God's creation, and our fellow hu-

manity. As we are shaped by the habit of facing Christ and others in this great feast of thanksgiving, we become keenly aware that an aspect of worshipping the triune God is to be present for and in communion with others.

### **PROPER JOY**

In the midst of a culture that celebrates insatiable desire, the Eucharist points us toward our true joy. Consumer culture urges us to pursue our individually-defined pleasures, provided they can be purchased in the market. Friendship, intimacy, and love become the objects we should buy and consume in the same manner that we purchase toothpaste, CDs, SUVs, or the latest technological gadget. To be happy (and define our identity), we are told to chase after more things and services. These twin pursuits, of pleasure for its own sake and of more and more things, are robbing us of our ability to experience genuine joy.

Consumer culture tempts us to take delight primarily in what the world has to offer. Now desire is not necessarily a bad affection. Christians are not called to refrain from desiring; we are called to desire the one true God (Psalm 42:1). God certainly wants us to enjoy the goodness of creation, but the creation and its pleasures should not become our idols.<sup>10</sup>

The Eucharist reminds us that true joy flows from a meal in which we claim again and again

humanity's created intention: "to glorify God and to enjoy God forever." At the table we delight in God as the creator of humanity as well as the grain and fruit shared in the meal. We delight in God as our redeemer in the crucified and risen Christ. And we are freed by the Holy Spirit to reclaim our identities as children of this giving and forgiving God. Even as we taste bread and wine, we glimpse with awe, wonder, and anticipation God's act of reconciliation and glorification.

When our lives are marked by a spirit of joy that flows from authentic praise and thanksgiving for God's abundant care, our covetousness will be checked. We will dwell daily in the joy of God's abiding presence in our lives together as the *ekklesia*, the "called out" community. We will find the contentment we seek, not in the "brands" we consume and wear, but in the

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**Contemporary advertising cultivates a worship of unlimited choice and a "paradoxical" loyalty to the transitory and fleeting. As consumers, we're encouraged to be deeply committed to being uncommitted. In contrast, the Eucharist cultivates the virtue of fidelity, grounded in the faithfulness of God toward us.**

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experience again and again of the wellspring of true joy, the God who transforms us and our relationships with all the rest of creation.

## NOTES

1 Rodney Clapp reports Calder's story in *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 127-128.

2 David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 77.

3 John DeGraaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publications, Inc., 2001), 13.

4 James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 25.

5 Michael Jessup, "Truth: The First Casualty of Postmodern Consumerism," *The Christian Scholar's Review* 30/3 (Spring 2001), 292.

6 Ibid. See, for instance, Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1972/1981), 38.

7 Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, 17-49.

8 Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 110-117.

9 Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 50.

10 Ibid., 71.

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# More Like Mephibosheth

BY LAURA SINGLETON

**Consumerism is first and foremost a culture of expectation, which can erode our ability to appreciate relationships, kindnesses, and other pleasures of life. We are trained to evaluate, inspect, and be suspicious that what is offered isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Isn't this mistrusting mindset exactly what the serpent exploited in Eden?**

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**M**y words were slightly whiny, but my tone was firm: “But this coupon doesn’t say it can’t be used with another coupon.” With “fight-or-flight” hormones kicking in, I was locked into position. Rarely do I find my defenses rising higher or my adrenalin pumping harder than in those moments of fatal confluence where my zealous frugality—not, of course, to be confused with that ugly word “greed”—meets my laser-like (and dangerously Pharisaical) focus on the “letter of the law.” Whether presenting a challenged coupon, facing a cancelled airline flight, or arguing an unrecognized credit card charge, I cloak myself in worldly cynicism and enter the battle determined not to be a dupe, but to be a super-savvy, not-taken-advantage-of, “don’t tread on me” brand of American consumer.

In this particular instance, the cashier, a girl less than half my age, abruptly took my coupon, and, with an “if it means that much to you, lady” look and a Gen X shrug, gave me my dollar. I walked away with a Pyrrhic victory, already repentant, and grateful that I wasn’t wearing my cross necklace or “fish” bracelet or anything that might sully the name of Christ with my little performance. It was not, in other words, a Mephibosheth moment.



Oddly enough, I find my twenty-first century American consumer behavior challenged by this ancient Israelite, he of the mellifluous name and malfunctioning feet, son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul, who makes a few cameo appearances in the second book of Samuel. Mephibosheth, to begin with, knew something about gratitude. We learn of him (and the unfortunate childhood accident that crippled his feet) in 2 Samuel 4:4, but his first real turn on the stage is in 2 Samuel 9, when he receives the largesse of the newly-risen King David. Having just ascended to the throne that he was anointed by God to take, David has every prerogative (within contemporary custom) to wipe out all family connected with the previous king, Saul. Instead, honoring a vow of friendship to his late and much-beloved friend Jonathan, he grants an inheritance of land, servants, and full access to the king's table to Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth. In return, Mephibosheth gratefully (and quite understandably) grovels, "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?" (2 Samuel 9:8).

Later on, however, in an incident connected with Absalom's rebellion, David's action is less generous. Mephibosheth's servant, Ziba, attempts to curry favor with the fleeing King David, bringing him provisions and telling him the apparent lie that Mephibosheth is gleefully expecting the revolt to end in his own ascent to the throne. In response to this rather far-fetched story, David instantly grants Mephibosheth's property to Ziba (2 Samuel 16:1-4). At the time, of course, he was running for his life and wasn't in a position to grant much of anything, but apparently he took the promise quite seriously, as evidenced in his response later, after the defeat of Absalom, when he returned to Jerusalem and found an unkempt and mournful Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth said that he asked for a donkey to be saddled so he could follow David, but Ziba treacherously left him behind. He thus remained helpless to do anything but wait anxiously for his patron's return.

On the whole, the story (with Mephibosheth's "uncared-for feet" surely an arresting visual aid) rings true. David, however, acts as though he's not sure who to believe, or maybe he'd rather keep his word to Ziba than call him a liar. Instead of censuring Ziba and returning Mephibosheth's inheritance, David divides the land between them. Our mis-footed hero, however, doesn't object—quite the opposite. "Let him [Ziba] take it all, since my lord the king has arrived safely," says the loyal Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 19:30).

Where's the outrage, the demand for rights? Of course, Mephibosheth is a footnote Old Testament character, the kind whose actions are just reported upon, not assessed. Perhaps we can't be sure his behavior is meant to be an example. We can surmise, for instance, that the Levite in Judges 19 who slices up his dead concubine (or the householder in Gibeah who proffered her to the mob in the first place) isn't meant to inspire present-day emulation. Mephibosheth, however, has some pretty good company.



Consider, if you will, these words, also from the second book of Samuel: “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?” (2 Samuel 7:18). Sound like our friend Mephibosheth? It’s King David himself, the man “after God’s own heart” who, perhaps all the more because of his faults, knew how little he deserved the kindness he received. There are other examples of this kind of humility and submission from rather credible sources. Try the previously-fiery John the Baptist, who turns followers away from him and toward Jesus, quietly saying, “He must increase, and I must decrease” (John 3:30). Then there’s the confoundingly humble Syrophenician woman, who doesn’t flinch at being called a Gentile “dog” who must wait for the benefits of the Gospel, and is commended by Jesus as a result (Matthew 15:21-28). And we can’t stop without noting Jesus himself, who “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (Philippians 2:6) and, along the way, told us to take the lowest place and turn the other cheek.

All of which gets me back to my argument in the supermarket, because the problem, I think, about consumerism is not just that it is a culture inspiring greed and materialism, but that it is first and foremost a culture of *expectation*. We are trained to evaluate, inspect, and be suspicious that what is offered isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. I will grant you that greed by the businesses on the other side of the equation often makes that suspicion warranted, but isn’t this mistrusting mindset exactly what the serpent exploited in Eden? For me, at least, I find that an attitude of expectation doesn’t just lead to disputes in supermarkets but, more seriously, erodes my ability to appreciate relationships, kindnesses, and other pleasures of life.

I think the problem is particularly insidious for Christians because the idea of expectation is too readily woven with spiritual-sounding language, much as the truth got twisted for Eve. In a small group meeting at a prayer retreat I once raised this thought that I felt God was showing me I needed generally to expect less and be more grateful. I was met, even in my rough-and-ready urban New England church, with raised eyebrows of solicitous concern. They pressed me with several questions. Perhaps, I sensed, they worried that I

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**The idea of expectation is too readily woven with spiritual-sounding language. God’s Word indeed promises great things—Christ’s return, resurrection to eternity with him, a new heaven and a new earth. But a smooth connection through O’Hare Airport doesn’t seem to be my birthright, even as a child of the King.**

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wasn't able to "expect great things from God" (a phrase not found in Scripture, by the way). I find, indeed, that God's Word promises me great things—the Lord's return, my own resurrection to eternity with Him, and a new heaven and a new earth, to name just a few. But a smooth connection through O'Hare Airport? It doesn't seem to be my birthright, even as a child of the King.

If we peruse the shelf at the average Christian bookstore, however, we find many titles promising a "happy life" or a "life you've dreamed of." I

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**The allure of having God meet all our expectations is, sadly, readily mangled by worldly assumptions, leaving us looking in dissatisfaction for the perfect church, the perfect job, the perfect home, the perfect mate.**

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don't mean to judge the authors, virtually all of whom I know have spiritual blessings in view, but the reality is that it's too tempting to take these claims at face value. Bruce Wilkinson, for example, explicitly states in *The Prayer of Jabez* that seeking God's "blessing" has "nothing in common" with

the idea that you can "cash in" on your relationship with God for material gain.<sup>†</sup> That didn't, however, stop his words from being misrepresented and misunderstood in precisely that way by some readers. Our natural desires, after all, perpetually run in the direction of self-interest. The allure of having our expectations met by God is, sadly, readily mangled by worldly assumptions. Thus perverted, it too often leaves us as Christians looking around in dissatisfaction for the perfect church, the perfect job, the perfect home, even perhaps the perfect mate.

But wait—I can hear the rumblings in my own heart, so I project them to my readers—isn't there such a thing as "righteous indignation" about goods and services? Aren't we ever allowed to take a stand? Jesus clearing the temple of moneylenders is usually the illustration raised to defend this point. We have to look, though, at what his motive was. We are told his gesture fulfilled the prophecy, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17, citing Psalm 69:9). Zeal for God's house, God's purposes, is the kind of zeal God endorses. Zeal for the rights of others, especially the weak and the poor, is what you find a lot of in the Bible, starting with the prophets and continuing through Christ himself. Making sure a dangerous child's toy got recalled is the kind of consumer-minded concern that might fit this call to action. However, even in conquering the land of Canaan, the Israelites got into trouble when they forgot that their mission was to follow God's plan and get only what God *gave* to them, not take what they could get or what they deserved. (See, for example, the ugly incidents at Ai in Joshua 7.) Getting "what I deserve" is unfortunately most often the

object of the zeal I exercise in my Consumer-Reports-minded reaction to errors and inconveniences—those moments when I confuse being “right” with being “righteous.” If God were actually to treat me as I deserve, then woe is me!

Thus I return to my role model, Mephibosheth, who didn’t mind comparing himself with dogs because, after all, that’s what he was in relation to the King. It may not have the ring of “Dare to be a Daniel” or even “Be Like Mike,” but being a little “More Like Mephibosheth” feels like an appropriate aspiration.

**NOTE**

<sup>†</sup>Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers 2000), 24.

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This photo is available  
in the print version of Consumerism.

**With subtle strokes the artist offers a warning: what we  
choose to do with money in a consumer culture makes  
noticeable differences in our lives.**

*Marinus van Reymerswaele (ca. 1490-1567), MONEY-CHANGER AND HIS WIFE, 1539. Oil on panel, 83 x 97 cm. Copyright © Museo del Prado, Madrid. All rights reserved.*

# Subtle Qualms

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Controversy surrounds this depiction of a banker and his wife in their counting house. Does the artist express subtle qualms about their money-changing, or simply commend their new profession in the emerging business culture of Northern Europe?

Marinus worked in the tradition of Quentin Metsys, who also painted scenes of tax-collectors, merchants, and moneychangers. Art historians observe satirical and moralizing symbols in their work, which they interpret as stinging critiques of avarice and greed. "In this painting...Van Reymerswaele approaches one of the principal evils of his time: usury, the greater of all possible sins in a commercial society such as Flanders," says a published guide to the Prado where this painting is housed. "Corruption and fraud affected all levels of society, even the clergy, producing a critical reaction on the part of writers, theologians and artists."<sup>1</sup>

Accounting historians offer a different reading of this painting and its genre: they say the artists approve of financial professionals. Marinus makes significant changes to his subject in contrast to an earlier painting by Metsys in 1514: the wife's left hand rests on an accounting book rather than a "book of hours" prayer book, and an abacus, a tool of the trade, is prominent in the foreground rather than various religious symbols.<sup>2</sup>

Changes in Northern Europe between 1514 and 1539 make both interpretations insightful. Artists painted occupational, secular portraits in Flanders. Market-driven workshops replaced the guild system, requiring financial professionals to handle purchases, commissions, and accounting ledgers. Moneychangers, goldsmiths, and bankers were respectable by 1539.

Yet I wonder about the untidy shelves behind this couple and tattered headdress of the banker, for avarice and greed are often linked with sloth. This man is not an intellectual surrounded by books, as one accounting historian notes is common in portraits of respected bankers in this era, but focuses only on weighing his money. Perhaps Marinus tempers his generally approving stance with a warning: what we choose to do with money in our consumer culture makes a subtle, but noticeable difference in our lives.

## NOTES

1 CD-ROM *La Pintura en el Prado*, 1996.

2 See Manuel Santos Redondo's paper at the 8th World Congress of Accounting Historians, Madrid, July 2000 at [www.ucm.es/BUCM/cee/doc/00-23/0023.htm](http://www.ucm.es/BUCM/cee/doc/00-23/0023.htm), September 22, 2003.

This photo is available  
in the print version of Consumerism.

**Guercino's powerful image invites us not only to recognize our motivations to act selfishly, but also to return to the forgiving and compassionate Christ.**

*Guercino (1591-1666), THE BETRAYAL OF CHRIST, c. 1621. Oil on canvas, 115.3 x 142.2 cm. Given by Capt. R. Langton Douglas, 1924. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.*

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# Horror and Invitation

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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Judas negotiated Christ's betrayal for thirty pieces of silver, a slave's value in Exodus 21:32 and the cynical payment to buy off a good shepherd in Zechariah 11:12, then looked for his best chance to deliver the goods (Matthew 26:14-16). The seventeenth-century Baroque artist Guercino depicts that moment of opportunity in the garden of Gethsemane. Christ has just said to Judas, who cowers in the left foreground with the bag of silver, "Friend, do what you are here to do," and the soldiers lay hands on Jesus (26:50).

Typically artists depict the kiss of Judas (Matthew 26:49, Mark 14:45, Luke 22:47) or Peter cutting off a soldier's ear (Matthew 26:51, Mark 14:47, Luke 22:50). Guercino instead focuses this dramatic and theatrically lit painting on the emotional exchange between Judas and Christ. Judas watches, horrified, as the soldier to his left drops a rope around Christ's neck. The drama is heightened in the painting by a compositional diagonal that continually draws our eyes back and forth between Christ and Judas, emphasizing this climactic moment in their relationship.

How Judas got to this point and what happened to him after this event is handled differently by the gospel writers. Matthew (26:14-16), Mark (14:10-11), and Luke (22:3-6) agree Judas's motive included money. Only Matthew's gospel mentions his remorse (27:3-10). "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood," Judas told the chief priests and elders, but they had no sympathy for him. In anger he threw the pieces of silver in the temple, then went and hung himself. The passage is powerful in its abrupt tone. Like Guercino, Matthew portrays Judas's painful loathing for what he has done.

Although Judas was motivated by selfish ambition and greed, this is a human failing for which he could have sought forgiveness. Judas went to the wrong person(s) for pardon. The apostle Peter was rehabilitated after denying Christ because he sought forgiveness from the only one who can grant it—Christ. Guercino depicts the face of Christ as full of forgiveness and with a sense of calm; Judas, blinded by his own panic and dismay, cannot see that compassion. Unforgiven by the priests and elders, and filled with frustration, guilt, and shame, he destroyed himself.

We are among the intended audience for Matthew's gospel and Guercino's painting. They invite us not only to recognize our motivations to act selfishly, but also to return to the forgiving and compassionate Christ.



This photo is available in  
the print version of Consumerism.

**Jesus' temple-clearing raises the difficult issue of when  
business strategies and values in the church interfere  
with worship.**

*Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), CHRIST DRIVING THE TRADERS FROM THE TEMPLE, 1832.  
Oil on mahogany, 92.1 x 70.5 cm. Copyright © Tate, London 2003.*

# Past the Blockade

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

All four gospels highlight the significance of Jesus' clearing of the temple. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this event in the last week of Jesus' ministry; in John, it is a motif of the gospel story. "Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves," Matthew reports. "He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers'" (21:12-13). Temple authorities, the "robbers," required worshipers to use temple coins to buy sacrificial animals, but charged high interest and gave low exchange rates for the Roman coins of the people.

Jesus was equally concerned with worship practices as with business procedures. His reference to Isaiah 56:7 reminds us the role of his house has been defined before, but has been forgotten. "The moneychanging was in the one place that non-Jewish worshipers could pray, and the commotion made their worship impossible," Craig Blomberg notes. "The application of Jesus' temple-clearing is not to mandate what can or can't be sold in a church building but the more difficult issue of when we allow church to be turned into a business in ways that compromise worship" (see p. 25).

Biblical stories were not a typical subject for Turner, an English artist best known for his romantic landscape paintings in watercolor and oil. He was already in his sixties when, in the 1830's, he studied religious themes through the work of old master painters such as Rembrandt. Although Turner's early artistic training was formal and he was involved in the Royal Academy of Painting, London, for his entire life, his subject choices centered on landscape rather than the human form. Rembrandt's religious works forced Turner to think about the content of biblical narratives and the compositional element of painting figures, two realms that were new and somewhat uncomfortable to him. He admitted that painting figures was "not my style."<sup>†</sup>

Most scholars agree that Turner used oil paintings such as these to work out the problems associated with depicting the figure. The Tate Gallery, where the artist bequeathed it, maintains he abandoned *Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple* as unsatisfactory and never finished it. It may have been intended to accompany the paintings of Shadrach, Meshech,

and Abednego that Turner exhibited in 1832.

Turner's signature style—described by his contemporary artist and friend, John Constable, as “tinted steam”—is evident here: his loose brushwork creates a hazy effect. Individual faces, seen here and there in the composition, are not detailed in a manner to reflect emotion. Even the figure of Christ is depicted in a gesture of prophetic preaching or welcome, rather than anger in turning over tables or brandishing a whip.

The application of paint is thick and dense; a mass of yellow color at Christ's feet represents the trembling mass of “robbers” he wants out of his house. As viewers we are led to the temple from this outer courtyard by a strong diagonal light, but these human figures meld into a wall or blockade between us and the temple entrance. The religious authorities, who exploit the sincerity of the worshipers for financial gain, were a problem then as they may be now.

#### **NOTE**

† Tate Online. *www.tate.org.uk*, 22 September 2003.

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**HEIDI J. HORNİK**

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# O God, You Own a Thousand Hills

BY TERRY W. YORK

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O God, you own a thousand hills,  
and all their cattle grazing.  
Would we, then, grasp for one hill more,  
our selfish greed full blazing?  
Our bigger barns are full of grain,  
none left behind for gleaning.  
We gather to ourselves so much,  
our giving has no meaning.

Should someone ask of us our coat,  
you call on us to give it.  
You ask us give our shirt, as well,  
if he who asks will take it.  
You call on us to share our wealth,  
not hoard and call it profit;  
consuming all within our reach  
and thinking we deserve it.

The empty hands of want and need  
we cannot see for grasping.  
How deeply baptized is our greed,  
how shallow is our giving.  
You gave to us your only son.  
You give to us salvation.  
Yet, we would claim these as our own,  
and claim as ours, creation.

Help us to give as you have giv'n,  
just daily bread consuming.  
Your rain brings water to our thirst;  
brings grain and fruit to blooming.  
Forgive all love and grace misspent,  
forgive our resource wasting.  
Give to our worldly appetites,  
your simple meal for tasting.

# O God, You Own a Thousand Hills

TERRY W. YORK

G. DAVID BOLIN

O God, you own a thou - sand hills, and  
Should some - one ask of us our coal, you  
The emp - ty hands of want and need we  
Help us to give as you have giv'n, just

all their cat - tle graz - ing. Would we, then, grasp for  
call on us to give it. You ask us give our  
can - not see for grasp - ing. How deep - ly bap - tized  
dai - ly bread con - sum - ing. Your rain brings wa - ter

one hill more, our self - ish greed full blaz - ing?  
shirt, as well, if he who asks will take it.  
is our greed, how shal - low is our giv - ing,  
to our thirst; brings grain and fruit to bloom - ing.

Our big - ger barns are full of grain, none  
 You call on us to share our wealth, not  
 You gave to us your on - ly son. You  
 For - give all love and grace mis - spent, for -

left be - hind for glean - ing. We ga - ther to our -  
 hoard and call it pro - fit; con - sum - ing all with -  
 give to us sal - va - tion. Yet, we would claim these  
 give our re - source wast - ing. Give to our world - ly

selves so much, our giv - ing has no mean - ing.  
 in our reach and think - ing we de - serve it.  
 as our own, and claim as ours, cre - a - tion.  
 ap - pe - tites, your sim - ple meal for tast - ing.

# Worship Service

BY E. ANN BELL

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## I. AWAKENING

*Call to Worship: Psalm 24:1-6*

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.  
Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?  
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.  
They will receive blessing from the LORD,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.  
Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

*Invocation:*

O God, you know our hearts, our inmost thoughts and desires. You see our stubbornness and our sincerity, our benevolence and our blindness. Our fears and motivations, secret even to ourselves, are not hidden from you.  
In this shared time and sacred space of worship, search us, confront us, stir our consciences, and transform us.  
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.  
Incline our ears to your beckoning. 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 truly be your people. Amen.



*Processional Hymn:*

“God of Grace and God of Glory”

God of grace and God of glory,  
on thy people pour thy power.  
Crown thine ancient church’s story,  
bring her bud to glorious flower.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
for the facing of this hour,  
for the facing of this hour.

Cure thy children’s warring madness,  
bend our pride to thy control.  
Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,  
rich in things and poor in soul.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal,  
lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal.

Save us from weak resignation  
to the evils we deplore.  
Let the search for thy salvation  
be our glory evermore.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
serving thee whom we adore,  
serving thee whom we adore.

*Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969)*  
*Tune: CWM RHONDDA*

*Reading from the Prophets: Ezekiel 37:1-14*

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

*Pastoral Reflection:*

The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act.

Walter Brueggemann<sup>1</sup>

*Solo Response:*

“The Church of Christ in Every Age”<sup>2</sup> (verse 1)

The church of Christ, in every age,  
beset by change, but Spirit led,  
must claim and test its heritage  
and keep on rising from the dead.

*Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000)*  
*Tune: WAREHAM*

**II. LAMENT**

*Litany:*

Leader: In mercy, O God, you confront us and expose our sin.

**People: May we respond in spirit and in truth,  
confessing our failure,  
reclaiming our hope.**

Even as we lift up your name,  
we offer allegiance to the patterns of this world.

**In passive and in active ways,  
we yield our souls to what is false.**

In our lust for lifeless objects and our relentless pursuit for more,  
we cross the line between innocent desire and masked idolatry.

**We dismiss our inner protests  
and slowly displace our faith with commercial philosophy  
and promises.**

We begin to seek salvation in spiritless things,  
to worship you for our own gratification,  
to see ourselves and each other as mere consumers and commodities.

**We treat people as expendable products  
and place ultimate significance in manufactured objects.**

**In our avoidance of human vulnerability,  
we deny our creation in your image.**

We, your people, have swallowed a subtle poison.

We have invested ourselves in the religion of our culture,  
and our substance has wasted away.

**We have become a valley of dry bones.**

Forgive us, O God, for we have sinned.

**In your mercy, raise us from the dead.**

Breathe new life into your people.

Empower us to be a prophetic community,  
living the gospel of Jesus.

**All: Create in us a consuming passion to love and serve you.**

*Organ Meditation:*

In forming a Christian response to contemporary consumerism it may help to recall that the original meaning of *consume* is to burn, to exhaust and to destroy completely. The object of our response to consumerism, then, is to try, with the Lord's gracious help, to avoid destroying ourselves in this behavior and to try to prevent our neighbor from being destroyed by such behavior as well.

Craig M. Gay<sup>3</sup>

*Hymn:*

"O God, You Own a Thousand Hills"

Terry W. York

(text and tune pp. 52-53 of this volume)

**III. CALL**

*Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 6:19-34*

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

*Choral Anthem:*

"A Heart to Love You More"<sup>4</sup>

*Sermon*

*Discipline of Silence:*

The Gospel is the most counter-cultural and the most significantly revolutionary document one could ever hope to find. It reveals the meaning and purpose of human life in terms which are close to being absolutely contradictory to the form of perceiving and valuing human persons in our culture.

John F. Kavanaugh<sup>5</sup>

*Hymn of Response:*

“O Breath of Life” (verses 1-3)

O Breath of Life, come sweeping through us,  
revive your church with life and power.

O Breath of Life, come, cleanse, renew us,  
and fit your church to meet this hour.

O Wind of God, come, bend us, break us,  
till humbly we confess our need.

Then in your tenderness remake us;  
revive, restore, for this we plead.

O Breath of Love, come, breathe within us,  
renewing thought and will and heart.

Come, love of Christ, afresh to win us;  
revive your church in every part.

*Bessie Porter Head (1850-1936)*

*Suggested tunes: ST. CLEMENT or SPIRITUS VITAE*

**IV. CENTERING***Offertory Prayer:*

Gracious God, as we come alive to your call to us, we are aware that this time of response is profoundly countercultural.

The consumer religion coaches us to believe that we are the center of the universe, that all things were created for us and our pleasure. We are taught to hoard our resources, to keep for ourselves, to value personal comfort above service and accumulation over sacrifice.

Yet you have shown us another way in the life and teachings of Jesus, in his death and resurrection.

As we reclaim our Christian heritage, we remember that all things were created for your pleasure, and we celebrate the invitation to participate in your work, bringing the ethics of heaven to earth. May we commit ourselves to you fully, making this offering not merely a token, but a guiding principle for our lives.  
We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

*Offertory Solo:*

"The Lord's Prayer"<sup>6</sup>

*Doxology*

*The Eucharist:*

The Eucharist grounds us in the self-giving life and death of Jesus. It is an act of receiving that recalls God's forgiveness and lays claim upon our lives as Christians. As we share the bread and the cup, we remember both a past event and our present calling to live as Jesus in the world. The choir leads us in the words of institution:

"In Remembrance"<sup>7</sup>

**V. COMMISSION**

*Responsive Benediction (Psalm 16:11):*

Awakened, renewed, and energized to meet the challenge before us, having re-centered our lives in the sacrificial love of Jesus, we now go forth as disciples, proclaiming with the psalmist:

**O God, you have shown us the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.**

*Recessional Hymn:*

"We Call Ourselves Disciples"<sup>8</sup>

We call ourselves disciples, as pilgrims on the way.  
We seek the truth in wisdom, and beauty in each day.  
As women, men, and children, we serve, Christ's path to clear.  
In joyful expectation we see God's reign draw near.

The cup and cross before us, proclaim our hope above,  
the sign of our Redeemer, the vessel of his love.  
Once more the cross is lifted, the cup poured out for all.  
When gathered at the table we hear our common call.

We're baptized in the spirit, in waters God provides.  
In Christ we rise to newness, for in him we have died.  
Now dead to powers of evil, and free from hopeless fears,  
we live with faith and purpose, creative through the years.

We join with all disciples to live the Word in deed,  
to share the cup of water and bread with all in need;  
to work till God's compassion and righteousness prevail,  
till all this planet's people know justice without fail.

So now the vision brightens, the light of Christ burns still  
in hearts of all disciples to be the church God wills.  
From quiet meditation and joyous hymns of praise,  
we go to do God's mission! Christ, lead us all our days!

*Jim Miller*

*Tune: LANCASHIRE*

## NOTES

1 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.

2 Copyright © 1971 Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

3 Craig M. Gay, "Sensualists Without Heart: Contemporary Consumerism in Light of the Modern Project," in Rodney Clapp, ed. *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 38.

4 *A Heart to Love You More* words by Samuel Wesley and music by Stan Pethel, © 2000 Belwin-Mills Publishing Corp.

5 John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*, revised edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 83.

6 *The Lord's Prayer*, music by Albert Hay Malotte, © 1935 G. Schirmer, Inc.

7 *In Remembrance*, words by Ragan Courtney and music by Buryl Red, © 1972 Broadman Press.

8 Copyright © 1995 Chalice Press. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

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# Talking Back to the Tube

BY BRETT R. DEWEY

**Most television advertisements unrelentingly encourage us to buy, buy, buy. We can respond to TV's seductive values not only with the "off" button, but by putting the TV in its place and actively talking back to the tube.**

---

**K***ill your television* exhorts Ned's Atomic Dustbin in a song about a young girl starved for the attention her father gives only to the small screen. What we need, these alternative British rockers sing, is "an intermission" for people to reconnect with one another; it would be "soap for sore eyes." In an echo of the societal estrangement felt by their young listeners, the band dissents from the promiscuous marketing and ravenous profit-taking by media conglomerates. The sentiment helped them sell 300,000 albums (even dissenters from television's charm, it seems, want a piece of the media pie that they decry). Their song is a powerful protest against the society-wide addiction to television watching. Churches need to enter this protest too.

Let me confess, I love television. I watch it for news, nap to its noise, and set my children before it when I need respite from household chaos. Through its best programs I connect with wider human experience and disconnect from life's pageant of trials. Yet I also realize that viewing TV wisely and resisting its barrage of consumerist values is part of caring for my family and myself. So, you see, I'm a TV addict on the way to recovery.

## **MOVING BEYOND TELECID**

Advertisements go hand-in-hand with television in our society, where network broadcasting is a free public service supported by private advertising revenue. Network television's survival depends on selling ads that convince us to consume. These ads are TV's most devious claim on our lives, for most—even when they are clever and funny—unrelentingly encourage us to buy, buy, buy.

*This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, the satirical Canadian comedy show, borrows



its name from the fact that commercial breaks legally swallow up twenty-two minutes of each hour's programming. Yet marketing infiltrates the rest with "placements" that embed consumer items in prominent and positive places through the fabric of the broadcast. Ad agencies, noting the tremendous boost news coverage of O. J. Simpson's dramatic flight from authorities in a Ford Bronco gave to the automaker and the SUV market, now pitch products on the sly in most storylines. Even the once-imagined haven from advertising, the Public Broadcasting System, lures corporate and local business dollars with the "underwriting" guise. PBS claims its children's cartoons, such as *Arthur*, promote healthy behavior, but such behavior is best rewarded with a tasty box of 100% pure fruit juice. Perhaps "this hour has 60 minutes" more accurately describes this marketing blitzkrieg.

A former and repentant advertising executive, Jerry Mander, famously blasts the small screen in *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*:

Television encourages separation: people from community, people from each other, people from themselves, creating more buying units and discouraging organized opposition to the system. It creates a surrogate community: itself. It becomes everyone's intimate advisor, teacher and guide to appropriate behavior and awareness. Thereby, it becomes its own feedback system, furthering its own growth and accelerating the transformation of everything and everyone into artificial form.<sup>1</sup>

Unrelenting in his critique of television and advertising strategists, Mander urges us to "kill our television" before it kills our communities, families, and selves. It creates zombies open to the whims of incoming images "that are recorded in memory whether you think about them or not. They pour into you like fluid into a container. You are the container. The television is the pourer." With dim hope in human capacity to resist television's seduction, he adds, "the viewer is little more than a vessel of reception, and television itself is less a communications or educational medium...than an instrument that plants images in the unconscious realms of the mind."<sup>2</sup> If we killed the tube, it would be self-defense.

Surely Mander goes too far, because whatever is wrong with television is partly our fault as viewers; we cannot blame everything on the programmers and their advertising partners. That's why the solution to television's advertising seduction is not 'telecide,' as Ned's Atomic Dustbin and Mander advise. To the extent we are the problem with television, we also hold the solution to its seduction. We ought not be zombies open to unfiltered images and strategies, but sifters of television's claims on our lives with the aid of Christian wisdom.

#### **PUTTING TV IN ITS PLACE...**

Reorganizing the space in our homes is a good way to start our protest

of the unfiltered images television bombards us with. How we order our space is an important, often unconscious aspect of our lives.

In my home we call the family room the "TV room," and this expression is the first sign that something has gone wrong. We've put the television in the middle of the widest wall, with our cushy couch and all the chairs in the room arranged for a good view. Everything points to the television. Even our olive wood Jesus from the Holy Land, beckoning the "least of these" to come to him, gazes toward the tube.

From our kitchen simply lean and peep to catch a glimpse of the strategically placed tube, and even in the dining room, once the holy of holies for family gatherings, the chairs can be turned for viewing. From three rooms we've made the television accessible; but as I see now, we've made relationships with each other more inaccessible. We've not oriented the sofas and chairs to encourage conversations among us. Our family room has become a place for isolated togetherness.

Our living space can be more family friendly. We can rearrange the furniture, limit the number of television sets to one, and shut it into a cabinet. There is a time, after all, to banish the television from sight.

### **...AND TALKING BACK**

A colleague shares the story that from the time his daughter was young, he and his wife talked back to their TV. When the parade of consumerist messages entered their home they exposed and made fun of them, debunking their exaggerated claims out loud. By her teen years their daughter had written them off as typically weird parents, until one day she made a shocking discovery at a friend's house. Returning home she announced, "They talk back to their TV too!" Apparently her parents were not the only "weird" ones!

Talking back to the tube is a form of active viewing that can help us resist deviant images and remain alert to the blurring between television show and ad. It can be fun, as well as prophetic, to expose malformed values of culture! We can be satirical without being cynical. For instance, families might create pigeonholes for the consumerist values they see. When an ad celebrates fame as the highest goal of life, call it "celebrity sophistry." When the thin and pretty, or muscular and handsome, become the model for human flourishing, expose the "beautiful people syndrome." "God so loves the pretty" gets our response "God so loved the world."

Younger children need extra assistance in responding to ads, for "children five and younger often can't distinguish between commercials and regular programming, and many children as old as nine or ten can't readily explain the purpose of advertising." Parents can watch TV with their kids and make a game of spotting ads: encourage children to say "Commercial!" each time a new one is shown, and talk with them about each one.<sup>3</sup>

Oddly enough, television itself has offered a hilariously profound

model of talking back in *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*, or "MST3K" to aficionados, with its send-ups of America's fascination with bad science fiction movies. On the show, a man trapped on a spaceship traveling endlessly through the outer darkness is forced to watch really, *really* dreadful movies. To endure the pain of it all, he creates robots to talk with as they watch the films. We view the movies over the shoulders of the man and his robots (seeing only their silhouettes on the bottom of the screen) and overhear their uproarious wisecracks. "Hey! That's the same crocodile that belly-flopped in the last movie!" quips one in reference to the hokey stock Africa footage of *The Leech Woman*, in which a one-hundred-forty-year-old woman lures unsuspecting scientists to Africa to find the fountain of youth. In another MST3K episode, a B-movie character falls through the sky as a robot supplements the dialogue, "He-e-elp, I'm falling at a 60-degree angle defying the laws of physics!"

MST3K's amusement and power come in stepping back from the culturally-laden characters and symbols in old B movies, then poking gentle fun at them and the audiences who once consumed their dreariness. (Perhaps in the future an MST3K-like program will find humor in *our* current viewing fare!) The show critiques our passive viewing of dismal programming, and shows how talking back to the small screen can be a lot of fun. In a similar way, the Gospel enables us step back from the characters and symbols laden with consumerist values on television today.

Television isn't all bad. We can watch it within a space that does not give the small screen primary attention, and talk back to the parade of images that try to shape our allegiances to brand and style. Then our TV rooms will be family rooms again, where we stand together against consumerist values that compete for our loyalty. We will not be passive receptacles of its images, but can discern when to talk back to the tube and when to just turn it off.

#### NOTES

1 Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1978), 133.

2 *Ibid.*, 204.

3 Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli, *Unplug the Christmas Machine* (New York: William Morrow, 1982), 60.

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# The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

BY ARTHUR SIMON

**We affluent Christians accept our comparative luxury and consider so little the suffering of others. Surely the spirit of mammon lives not only within the secular culture, but also within the church and within us. We want our piece of the earth. But, says Jesus, it is the meek who inherit the earth.**

---

Jesus was remarkably out of step with prevailing values. It was true then; it is true today. The rich and powerful are in deep trouble with God, he said. The poor, the lowly, and the despised are honored and welcome in the kingdom. The affluent are no less welcome, but they have to leave their baggage behind.

The call of Jesus and his invitation to the kingdom is good news for everyone, but it goes to everyone on the same terms. Both rich and poor, devout and derelict need to repent, to trust God with all their heart, and to let go of anything that imprisons them—money, pride, worry, hopelessness, whatever it may be. The rich are asked to humble themselves before God, the poor to believe they are exalted in Christ. All of us are asked to do both.

That is not exactly the wisdom of the world.

In our world, it is clearly those with money, power, and talent who get ahead. Yet Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5)<sup>1</sup>. The beatitudes reflect a fundamental paradox: Mammon is ours, the earth is ours, life is ours—if we return them to God. This is nonsense to the world, which knows that “to the victor belong the spoils.”

I heard a radio interview with an author of a book about insider-trading scandals on Wall Street. He said there are two sets of conflicting messages that Americans hear, starting in childhood. One says, "Do good, be honest, and obey the law." The other says, "Take what you can for yourself." In the world of male achievers, he observed, the second of the two messages predominates. For example, what do fraternity brothers talk about when they sit down for a beer? Does anyone ever say, "I had a chance to make a killing, but I decided to be honest instead?" No, they brag about how they have made a killing. The same applies when they move out into the world that includes Wall Street. They want to make it. There is even something exciting about leading a double life—outwardly a conservative, respectable businessman but inwardly working all the angles to get rich. People seldom ask, "How did you make the money?" They just say, "He made a bundle and is a great success."

A similar application could be made regarding sexual values and behavior, or the pursuit of fame, or power. I describe the culture of mammon a bit crassly. Perhaps most of us want to make it, to enjoy the symbols of success, but hope to do it honestly. When my oldest son, Nathan, was a teenager, he told me that he had decided to become a stockbroker, a millionaire by age thirty, and retire in the Bahamas. I told him I would be deeply hurt to see him fail so badly. (At age thirty, struggling to support a family, he thanked me for the conversation.)

The world tells us that the aggressive inherit the earth, and we are probably inclined to believe that it is so. A cartoon in the *The New Yorker* showed a portly man and his wife admiring scenic fields and trees through the picture window of their living room. The man says: "God's country? Well, I suppose it is. But I own it."<sup>2</sup> We laugh because the man is a caricature of ourselves.

It still jars me to see how casually we affluent Christians accept our own comparative luxury, while others have almost nothing. I am appalled that I take my own privileges largely for granted and consider so little the suffering of others. Surely the spirit of mammon lives not only within the secular carriers of culture, but also within the church, within ourselves. We want our piece of the earth.

But, says Jesus, it is the meek who inherit the earth.

#### **WHO ARE THE MEEK?**

*Webster's New World Dictionary* defines meek as (1) patient and mild; not inclined to anger or resentment; and (2) too submissive; easily imposed on; spineless; spiritless. The second definition probably gives the most common understanding—"meek" is not usually a compliment—but it is laughable to think that Jesus meant to applaud the spineless. The first definition is clearly related to what Jesus had in mind. But is that all he meant by meek?

Psalm 37, from which the Beatitude is taken, urges trust in the Lord despite the apparent success of wicked men. Soon the wicked will be no more, the psalmist says. "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace" (v. 11). The psalmist also promises inheritance of the land to "those who hope in the LORD" (v. 9), are "righteous" (v. 29), and "wait for the LORD and keep his way" (v. 34).

Far from suggesting excessive submission to others, meekness means submission to God, which gives strength for obedience. Moses is called "more humble ["meek" in some translations] than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3). He was not being called a sissy. Nor did the astonishing compassion and dedication of Jesus to his mission suggest someone ready to wilt before a challenge. These virtues he received from God and offered totally to God. That he carried his obedience to the cross for our sake defined the meekness of Jesus as extraordinary courage.

We are now called to receive the mind of Christ and follow him. This is the way of meekness for us. The virtues he lived are ours to imitate.

In blessing the meek, Jesus is lifting up not the acquisitive and well-connected, but the poor, the powerless, and those more often oppressed than successful, who typically wind up on the underside of social respectability. Most of us, myself included, have a hard time accepting this eagerly, and a hard time receiving the gift of the kingdom as really good news, because we are among the privileged. It is hard to seize a disturbing truth when a comfortable life depends on toning it down. Perhaps that is why, as John Haughey has observed, "We read the Gospel as if we had no money, and we spend our money as if we know nothing of the Gospel."<sup>3</sup>

The socially and economically disenfranchised have less about which to feel self-sufficient and seem more eager to welcome the good news that God wants us to enter the kingdom. It is no coincidence, then, that the poorest fifth of the U.S. population consistently gives a higher proportion of income to charitable causes than do middle- and upper-income groupings. Most of us are poor in generosity rather than in spirit, for to recognize our spiritual poverty and the riches of God's grace leads to generosity. What would happen if we *really* became meek? What if we showed extravagant generosity with God's gifts to us? How much more empow-

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**What would happen if we really became meek? What if we showed extravagant generosity with God's gifts to us? How much more empowered our lives and the mission of the church would be. And how much less suffering the world would have.**

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ered our lives and the mission of the church would be. And how much less suffering the world would have. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34). By that standard, mammon appears to have a clear edge. We are not so meek after all.

The examples of Jesus and Moses teach us that to be meek is not to be shorn of ambition, but to have one's ambition transformed from self-serving purposes to that of serving God. Much has been made recently of an obscure prayer of a man named Jabez who asked the Lord to "bless me and enlarge my territory" (1 Chronicles 4:10), a prayer that is being held up as a model for Christians.<sup>4</sup> If the intent is truly to ask God to enlarge opportunities for love and service, such a prayer is to be fervently offered, for that is ambition transformed. But if, set in our mammon-driven culture, the focus is on *me* and *my* territory, and the underlying intent is to use God to gain more for myself, it is an exercise in self-deception and in capitulation to urges that are anything but meek. "It is a scandal and a sin to ask God for more when we are not being faithful with what we have," writes Peter Larson.<sup>5</sup> The model prayer for meekness and other virtues of the kingdom remains the Lord's Prayer.

"The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). Those who acknowledge this by placing their hope in God and offering what they are and what they have to him and to his children in need—those are the meek. To them the promise is given—inherit the earth.

### **INHERIT THE KINGDOM**

If Jesus tells the meek that the earth will belong to them, why did he say, as also recorded in the Sermon on the Mount, *not* to gather earthly treasures? "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

These words bring us back to the paradox that we find life by giving it to Christ. To inherit the earth, we must let go of the earth. To obtain the earth, we must give earthly treasures away and place our heart elsewhere.

There are two sides to this paradox. The first is that letting go of the earth is to acknowledge that the earth belongs to the Lord. In that recognition comes the realization that the earth, all of it, is a gift for us to treasure, care for, and enjoy. The person who is preoccupied with mammon focuses on microscopic bits of the earth: a piece of property, a position, a bank account, a house, a closet full of clothes. Even the richest of the rich, or the most powerful of the powerful, garner a pathetically small fraction of the earth. They can become so engrossed in possessing what they call "mine" that they lose sight of the fact that they are stewards, not owners. They then mistake their identity, forgetting that they were made in the image



of God and therefore also belong to God. (Caesar's image is on the coin, so Caesar gets his tax—but God gets what is stamped with God's image.)

Rich or poor, being captive to mammon means failing to see the earth as God's gift. A person may smile smugly and say, "The world is my oyster," but what he or she really means is, "Look at this tiny speck of earth that I have succeeded in making my own!" Such an appreciation of the earth turns a person toward self rather than toward God, robbing one of gratitude and joy.

The second side of the paradox is that the things of the earth will not last. Its treasures are subject to decay and to theft. Rich people, too, will decay—but this they forget in their preoccupation with mammon. Therefore, the only lasting treasures (whether money, time, ability, or influence) are those invested in heaven—that is to say, those given to help others, those put in service for the needy, those shared with the poor, those furthering the mission of the church, those protecting the earth for future generations. These, offered to God, have transcendent value. First John tells us not to love the world of sinful craving and pride: "The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever" (2:17). In a similar vein, the letter of James tells us, "Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—because they will pass away like a wild flower" (1:9-10).

We inherit the earth by seeing it with the eyes of faith. Because we are part of God's new creation in Christ, we can perceive the world as it really is, and as it one day will be when, in the resurrection, the reign of God is fully revealed.

When the heart is given to God, mammon becomes a servant. We can then place it among other things to be enjoyed and used in a way that honors the God to whom everything belongs. And God, in turn, honors us not simply with the earth, but with the kingdom as our inheritance. A house, a bed, a family meal, friendships, work, prayer, pleasure, income, citizenship—these and all other things are changed, their value dramatically enhanced because they are accepted as treasures to enjoy and employ for the highest of purposes.

The God who richly loves us and has made this so evident in Christ opens his heart and wants to give us more than we can possibly fathom. We instinctively reach for something ridiculously small, but God says, "Inherit the earth." We may wish for passing advantages, but God says, "Inherit the kingdom." They are not different promises, but one and the same. Why should we ever wish for something so insignificant and transient as wealth or fame when God offers us the kingdom as an inheritance? And to celebrate the kingdom, why would we not gladly die to our privileges so that others may live?

The Roman conquerors, and all conquerors before and after them, fought, suffered, and risked death for the sake of treasure and a taste of fleeting glory. But in Christ, we have a glory from God that is lasting, and one that is incomparably superior. The brief reach of the Romans for glory prompted them to great sacrifice. They did it for a culture of death. We do it for life—for a crown that lasts forever.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

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2 Cited by Frank E. Gaebelien, "Old Testament Foundations for Living More Simply," *Living More Simply*, Ronald J. Sider, ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 27.

3 John Haughey, *Virtue and Affluence: The Challenge of Wealth* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997), cited by Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington: Church of the Saviour, 2001), 5.

4 Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2000).

5 Peter Larson, "Who Needs Jesus When You've Got Jabez?" *Prism*, Sept/Oct 2001, 28.

6 This article is reprinted from Arthur Simon, *How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* (Baker Book House, 2003), 175-182. Used by permission of DIVISION, a division of Baker Book House Company, copyright © 2003. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.



### ARTHUR SIMON

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# From Francis to Fezziwig

BY KATIE COOK

In our search for a lifestyle of integrity and responsibility, how can we avoid turning simplicity into a new legalism for the More Socially Sensitive Than Thou? Francis of Assisi, the curiously merry saint of carefree radical poverty, and Dickens' loveable character Fezziwig remind us that joyful simplicity is much more than cutting back for the sake of cutting back.

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About 25 years ago, the Holy Spirit nudged me in a new and unexpected direction: the way of Francis of Assisi. Many people have been drawn to this remarkable thirteenth-century Italian who sought to fully imitate the life of our Lord—but not too many from my own Texas Baptist background. My prosperity-theology rearing was certainly at odds with the curiously joyful saint of carefree, radical poverty.

Francis taught me a thing or two about living the gospel. Simplicity was certainly an important lesson—but so was the paradoxical joy that came with it.

Lately I've noticed that Francis' *joyful simplicity* is missing in the lives of many of us who have chosen the path of radical discipleship. In our search for a lifestyle of integrity and responsibility, we have misunderstood simplicity.

I originally embraced the way of Christian simplicity because I was so tired of petty rules, so burdened with "don'ts" and "shall nots." But I fear we are in grave danger of making radical discipleship into a new legalism. Indeed, radical evangelicals can be as intolerant as fundamentalists, with arrogance and wholesale condemnation for Christian sisters and brothers who are "less enlightened," whose consciousness has not been "raised."

Had I fled from the Holier Than Thou only to run face-to-face into the More Socially Sensitive Than Thou?

None of which seems to me to be of the spirit of Francis—and certainly not of Jesus.

Lately I've been responding more seriously to the challenge of Francis: to keep joy and celebration within strict discipleship, to prove that there is more to simplifying than cutting back for the sake of cutting back.

I started by noting things the human spirit cannot live without. Color was what I noticed first.

While researching the life of Anne Hutchinson, the rebellious member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the seventeenth century, for a play I was writing for my youth group, I was appalled and depressed by the description of life in that early American Puritan community. The excessive primness and stern attitude toward daily living terrified me. Colors were discouraged, and enjoyment was suspect. A good upright Christian wore somber hues—gray, black, and brown. I would have shriveled and died in that atmosphere!

I love colors—in sunsets, flowers, balloons, stained-glass with the sun streaming through, clothing, window curtains, and impressionist paintings. Vivid, brilliant splashes of colors are essential to my spiritual health. And so I came to my first conclusion: I must find a way to simplify my lifestyle without killing the colors in it.

Merriment also invited anathema in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Laughter has often been suspected by Christians. There may be no explicit documentation of Jesus laughing, but surely he did! How could he live in the world he made, brimming with the wonders of nature and delights of friendship, and never laugh? *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz suggests that Jesus would not have been invited to so many dinners if he had not been good company.

Francis held a special appreciation for what he called “holy laughter.” He frequently played the role of a jester; it was part of his personality, his spirit. Why, after all, did so many people feel drawn to this man who insisted on living the life of a beggar? Because he taught a strict rule and put ashes in his potatoes? No, it was because he did everything—hard, crazy, wonderful things—with joy. He found color and vibrancy in nature. He danced in the meadows and in the streets. His life did not lack merriment.

Even his followers were known for their laughter. In the fourteenth century they found themselves under the close scrutiny of the watchdogs of the Inquisition. But it wasn't their poverty alone that made them suspect—they also laughed too much.

A third human need is for festivity.

Many Christians fear that festivity requires indulging in worldly pleasures. We radicals shun parties and good times, nervous about becoming

entangled in the snares of materialism. The latter fear is not illegitimate.

But I am discovering more and more that we can have festivity without selling out to Mammon, without embracing the greedy trappings of a consumer culture. Chrysanthemums brought from a garden on a frustrating afternoon can keep me going for days. A candle from a Kentucky friend, burning next to me as I write, works miracles in my heart. My niece's drawing with rainbows and balloons and "I love you" gives me the strength to plunge into a dreaded project. Festivity does not take much forethought or work; nor does it take much money, if any at all.

Which brings me to Fezziwig. If you have not read Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* every December until you can quote it verbatim, let me introduce you to this jolly old guy.

Fezziwig appears in the second stave of Dickens's story, when the Ghost of Christmas Past is guiding Scrooge through his miserly times gone by. When they reach the warehouse where Scrooge was apprenticed, that "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner" cries out in great excitement: "Why, it's old Fezziwig! Bless his heart, it's Fezziwig alive again!"

Scrooge then observes his former self reveling in one of the most joyous parties ever given. The whole community has been invited by Scrooge's friend and is enjoying the festivities—even the boy suspected of stealing and the one who had his ears boxed by his master. Food is plentiful, merriment and music are abundant, and old Fezziwig is the life of the party.

The Ghost of Christmas Past turns to Scrooge, who has been ecstatic during the merrymaking, and says scornfully, "A small matter to make these silly folks so full of gratitude."

"Small!" exclaims Scrooge, sounding more like his former self than the miser he has become, as if he cannot believe his ears.

"He has spent but a few pounds of your mortal money. Is that so much that he deserves this praise?" asks the Ghost. "It isn't that," replies Scrooge. "It isn't that, Spirit. He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count 'em up; what then? The happiness he gives is quite as great as if it cost a fortune."

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**We can have festivity without selling out to Mammon, without embracing the greedy trappings of a consumer culture. Festivity does not take much forethought or work; nor does it take much money, if any at all.**

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Fezziwig grasps a crucial secret. A simple employer but not a wealthy one, he knows how to spend a few pounds and provide a delightful evening. And through him Scrooge begins to understand this truth. At the end of *A Christmas Carol*, the reformed miser is giddy with happiness, the joy of being alive, and the fun of giving and sharing. He embraces Fezziwig's secret.

It was Jesus' secret too. In my search for a responsible Christian lifestyle I have one disagreement with Francis, who said that Christ was a beggar and that therefore he, Francis, would be a beggar. While it is true that Jesus had no home of his own and relied on the hospitality of others for food or shelter, our Lord was not ascetic. Yes, Jesus lived simply. He was a carpenter's son from a poor village during the Roman occupation. Yet the more I look at him, the more I see—parties! Jesus dined with Pharisees; he accepted as a follower Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy and prominent member of the Sanhedrin. And he went to lots of parties—his first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding reception! Jesus knew how to celebrate friendship; he knew how to celebrate living.

Richard Foster, in *Freedom of Simplicity*, says that true biblical spirituality affirms the goodness of material things. In Genesis 1, after creating each material thing, God proclaims, "That's good!" Asceticism, on the contrary, suggests an inherent corruption in the physical world; it is neither Hebrew nor Christian in its origin and might be accused of having Gnostic overtones.

Look at how Jesus describes the end of time as the wedding feast of the Lamb. It's going to be a big, eternal party! But if we become hung up on sacrifices and giving up things and scrutinizing others so that they do not enjoy themselves too much, we may not know what to do when we get to the Big Party. We'll be like the unprodigal son who refuses to go to his father's feast because there's a brother there who doesn't deserve the celebration.

As disciples of Jesus, we follow a path that avoids both asceticism and bad stewardship. We seek to live responsibly, fully caring for all our neighbors sharing this globe. We cannot hoard the provisions we have, as if to say, "I'm not sure about God's care and whether this will be available to me later. I'd better keep some in store." If we are to be free, we must let go of the fear that grace for tomorrow's needs may not be forthcoming.

Simple living, we must remember, is a gift, a new freedom. If we express our simple-living values with an arrogant, egotistical manner and continually compare ourselves with others, our actions may be correct, but the root of our discipleship is shallow or misplaced. When our inner conversion is not well-rooted in the gospel, simplicity becomes an unbearable burden to ourselves and those around us. But when we accept simple living as a gift, we are able to see money as a good resource to use for the

Kingdom's work—but also a potentially dangerous tool, not to be sought for our own uses. We will learn to throw our party without using the goods that were intended for the needs of the household.

How do we maintain this balance? How do we throw a party, or join in the festivities, and still be responsible for the needs of the household? In Fezziwig and Francis we glimpse the joy to which our Lord calls us: they loved people and friendship and good company. They danced through life in spite of suffering and they embraced it all—the tears as well as the joy. Francis danced in the rain and lived with social outcasts; Fezziwig threw a big party and made life a little more pleasant for his community, while rebuffing the word “exclusive.” They remind us of Jesus, who invited the forgotten people in the nooks and crannies to be his guests. They knew how to celebrate without shutting their eyes to the terribly real pain all around them.

I want to live my life their way. You can have the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the ascetics, the watchdogs of the Inquisition, the new legalists. I want to center myself in an authentic inward journey that will enable me to laugh in the midst of my pain. I want to serve the hopeless in a way that will not scare them away from the true gospel. I want to celebrate the simple life—not endure it.

#### **NOTE**

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# Beyond Candy Cane Lane

BY F. MATTHEW SCHOBERT, JR.

**Our Christmas cheer turns sour as mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, burgeoning debt, and an exhausting calendar of activities overwhelm us. Buying fair-trade gifts and celebrating Christmas within the context of the Christian year are two humble practices for disentangling the holy day from consumerism.**

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Sometime in November we sense the approach of Christmas. Sounds of the season—caroling, cantatas, and holiday tunes—begin to float from schools and churches, echo on street corners and in shopping malls, and beam from every radio station. Evening television is populated again with holiday classics, Christmas specials, and a cast of beloved imaginary characters—Rudolph, Frosty, and Charlie Brown. And we espy specimens of the season’s most prominent personality, the grandfatherly gift-giver himself, jolly old Saint Nicholas. We may nod in approval as Perry Como croons “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.”

Yet this holiday cheer can turn sour all too easily, and Christmas become anything but a magical season of celebration and fellowship. Scott Cairn’s *Advent* captures this shift in mood:

Well, it *was* beginning to look a lot like Christmas—everywhere, children eyeing the bright lights and colorful goods, traffic a good deal worse than usual, and most adults in view looking a little puzzled, blinking their eyes against the assault of stammering bulbs and public displays of goodwill. We were *all* embarrassed, frankly—the haves *and* the have-nots—all of us aware something had gone far wrong with an entire season, something had eluded us. And, well, it was *strenuous*, trying to recall what it was that had charmed us so, back when we were much smaller and more obli-



vious than not concerning the weather, mass marketing, the insufficiently hidden faces behind those white bears and other jolly gear. And there was something else: a general diminishment whose symptoms included the Xs in Xmas, shortened tempers, and the aggressive abandon with which most celebrants seemed to push their shiny cars about. All of this seemed to accumulate like wet snow, or like the fog with which our habitual inversion tried to choke us, or to blank us out altogether, so that, of a given night, all that appeared over the mess we had made of the season was what might be described as a nearly obscured radiance, just visible through the gauze, either the moon disguised by a winter veil, or some lost star—isolated, distant, sadly dismissing of us, and of all our expertly managed scene.<sup>1</sup>

Mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, burgeoning debt, and an exhausting calendar of activities can utterly overwhelm the strongest person. For too many of the weak and alone, especially shut-ins and convalescents, Christmas brings well-intentioned, yet fleeting, songs of carolers in an otherwise open calendar of painful solitude. Yes, something has indeed “gone far wrong with an entire season.”



In a small town not far from where I grew up in southern Illinois, immediately following Thanksgiving a typical middle-class neighborhood transforms into Candy Cane Lane—the region’s largest display of lights, seasonal greetings, holiday characters, and manger scenes. Spectator-packed vehicles throng to tour this street and admire its decorations. The diffuse glow in the surrounding night sky over Candy Cane Lane that marks the celebratory excess of America’s real religion, consumer capitalism, obscures the radiance of the Infant’s star.

As surely as the season brings excessive decorations, so too does it ring in the year’s most unrestrained shopping spree. And then we endure the inevitable, annual backlash of sermons, letters to the editor, magazine articles, and catchy bumper stickers frantically reminding us to “Put Christ back in Christmas” because “Jesus is the Reason for the Season.”

Bemoaning this commercialization of Christmas in the U.S. is nearly as old a tradition as is gift-giving. “In about 1830,” notes historian Stephen Nissenbaum, “the literature of Christmas in America began to change. Before that date it dealt chiefly with questions of social disorder. Afterward, a new concern emerged, an anxiety about private selfishness and greedy consumerism, especially as those issues affected children.”<sup>2</sup>

Christmas celebrations in early America often were very different from today’s family-oriented affairs. Instead of sentimental occasions for gift-giving or well-wishing, they were more akin to *Mardi Gras* in New Orleans.

People celebrated by indulging in alcohol, food, promiscuity, “mumming” (cross-dressing accompanied by sexual antics), and wassailing (*demanding* gifts from superiors, often with the threat of violence). It was an opportunity for social inversion during which the poor would invade the homes of the wealthy and demand gifts of food, drink, and money. “Give us some figgy pudding, we won’t go until we get some,” was more than an expression of boisterous gaiety; it was a thinly veiled threat from a band of boys and young men bursting into your parlor!

It occasioned such outrageous public disorder that some Protestants, particularly the New England Puritans, tried to stamp out the Christmas holiday altogether. They quickly pointed out (and rightly so) that Scripture doesn’t give a date for Christ’s birth and that December 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen by the early church to “Christianize” pagan religious feasts that occurred during the winter solstice. But as the Puritans discovered, eradicating Christmas observances and their offensive revelry was an effort in futility.

As northeastern cities grew into industrialized urban centers crowded with large immigrant, working-class populations, unruly Christmas and New Year celebrations became ever greater causes of concern. A group of New York elites struck upon a solution: they decided to reinvent the holiday! Nissenbaum recounts how these Knickerbockers transformed a season of raucous public mayhem into one of domestic gift-giving. Their success lay in *inventing* nostalgic traditions of home and hearth. The principle means of achieving this was through the creation of Santa Claus, an invented character that soon included his own history, geography (the North Pole), and cast of supporting characters (elves, reindeer, and eventually a Mrs.). The most successful literary vehicle in this transformation was Clement Moore’s “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” written in 1823. Moore’s poem captured the hearts of adults and children alike. Within a few years, retailers were using Santa Claus to promote shopping and gift-giving. Once this commercialization took root, as early as the 1830s, helped along by the rise of advertising, marketing, and the industrial production of goods, it was only a matter of time until consumerism replaced public rowdiness and drowned out the angelic chorus announcing the Newborn King.<sup>3</sup>



We enjoy exchanging gifts with loved ones and, truthfully, there is nothing wrong with gift-giving. Yet, as James Tracy notes, “storming the malls to purchase the new toy craze [our] children demand as the result of a television advertising blitz constitutes markedly different cultural content than does gift exchange.”<sup>4</sup> It reveals the triumph of an ethos of consumerism—an insatiable appetite to acquire merchandise, the conviction that our happiness lies in the next purchase, the sense that life’s highest good is the accumulation of material possessions, and the belief that what we own de-

defines our worth. It's behaving as though we are, as the bumper sticker declares, "Born to Shop!"

This consumerist perspective invades the church too. "Across the spectrum of church life, both liberal and conservative," observes Walter Brueggemann, "the contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or act."<sup>5</sup> We live as *de facto* consumers in nearly every aspect of our lives. We consume entertainment, education, healthcare, politics, and worship. All of this pulls apart the spiritual fabric that binds us together in ways that cannot be quantified, packaged, marketed, bought, or sold.

What challenges Christians in America "is not just that we have become consumers," says Stanley Hauerwas, "but that we can conceive of no alternative [ways of living] since we lack any practices that could make such [alternatives possible]."<sup>6</sup> We have so embraced the gospel of the American Dream, which says we need a big house, new car, nice clothes, and comfortable lifestyle to be happy, that we cannot think of living any differently. We have forgotten, domesticated, or simply ignored the radical call in biblical stories and songs to be peacemakers, care for the poor, live simply, and serve others. In ancient Israel, when God's people forgot their true vocation as a nation of priests to the world, the Lord sent prophets to awaken them from their stupor. [They] *criticized* cultural beliefs and practices that seduced God's people and *energized* them with prophetic speech and action to live differently from the dominant culture.<sup>7</sup>

Keeping with this prophetic model, let's consider two courses of action—shopping subversively and rooting our holiday festivities within the Christian

year—that can *energize* our celebration of Christmas and our critical engagement with the culture of consumerism.

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**There is nothing wrong with exchanging gifts with loved ones. Yet, "storming the malls to purchase the new toy craze...constitutes markedly different cultural content than does gift exchange." It reveals the triumph of an ethos of consumerism.**

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A quiet revolution is spreading over the country, even reaching into quiet little Elm Mott, Texas. At World Hunger Relief's Village Store you can purchase picture frames from India, Christmas ornaments from Bangladesh, candles from Mexico, tribal masks from Kenya, musical instruments from Cameroon, kitchenware from Haiti, and coffee from El Salvador and

Tanzania. There are also children's toys, jewelry, baskets, wind chimes, household and holiday decorations, and organically-grown teas from all over the world. The revolution is that these are *fair-trade* goods from artisans and farmers in developing countries.

Fair-trade employs market processes similar to free-trade, but conducts business according to a different set of principles and practices. Everyone

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**In a school calendar, Christmas is “time off” between semesters; in the secular calendar, it’s the crown jewel of a year-ending triad of holidays. Only the church calendar places it in its true context—between the penitential season of Advent and the redemptive events of Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.**

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is familiar with free-trade system abuses that occur apart from adequate legal protections or ethical practices—sweatshops, environmental devastation, or the exploitation of economically-disadvantaged workers. Fair-trade avoids these abuses by being thoroughly committed to long-term, sustainable economic growth that encourages social development. It is defined by seven funda-

mental practices: fair wages, cooperative workplaces, consumer education, environmental sustainability, financial and technical support for workers and their communities, respect for indigenous cultural identity, and public accountability.<sup>8</sup> Profit is important in fair trade, but only as a means to helping people and communities flourish. As much as forty percent of a fair-trade item's retail price is returned to the producer and reinvested in community development projects like education, healthcare, sanitation, or micro-loan programs. Buying fair-trade gifts is one way of shopping subversively. It can be a refreshing alternative to storming the shopping malls.

We can root Christmas in the seasons of the Christian year by allowing the church's calendar to shape our celebrations. In an academic calendar, Christmas is “time off” sandwiched between semesters; in the secular calendar, it's the crown jewel of a year-ending triad of holidays, Thanksgiving-Christmas-New Year's Eve. Only the church calendar places Christmas in its true context—following the penitential season of Advent and before the redemptive events of Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

Worshiping through these seasons of the church calendar richly shapes our lives by keeping us ever-mindful of God's divine drama. “Just as the Hebrew year focused upon holy days and seasons which were constant reminders of God's covenant,” Norman Maring notes, “so our observance of the Christian year,” which pivots on the central events of Jesus' life and our response to them, “would help to surround us with reminders of the

lordship of Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> The Christian year preserves us from slipping into sentimental or secular celebrations of Christmas by reminding us that the significance of Christmas is revealed in Lent’s overshadowing event. “Why lies He in such mean estate, / Where ox and ass are feeding?” asks William Dix in the beloved hymn “What Child Is This?” and the answer is found at Calvary:

Good Christians, fear, for sinners here  
the silent Word is pleading.  
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,  
the cross be borne for me, for you.  
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,  
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

In a provocatively titled chapter, “Let the Pagans Have the Holiday,” Rodney Clapp suggests the best way for Christians to reclaim Christmas is by first reclaiming Easter. “To put it another way,” he explains, “we could be Christians without the stories of Christmas, but not without the stories of Easter.”<sup>10</sup> Clapp’s point is worth keeping in mind, for as startling to contemporary sensibilities as it may be, celebrating Christ’s birth was of relatively little importance for the early church, which was far more concerned with his life, death, resurrection, and promised return. Only in the fourth century did the nascent Roman Catholic Church establish December 25<sup>th</sup> as the date to observe Christ’s birth in the west. Christmas soon competed with Easter and Epiphany, the two most significant days of the year, for preeminence.<sup>11</sup> Prior to this, celebrating Jesus’ birth was, at best, a distant third among Christian holy days. By the end of the sixth century, Advent developed as a four-week season of repentance and preparation for the threefold mystery of Christ’s coming—as a human baby; in worship through Word, Sacrament, and Spirit; and in his promised future return in judgment and glory. If we would reconsider, with Easter-eyes, our celebration of Christmas, we might resist culture’s offering of salvation in marketed goods, and receive and share in the gift of the Christ child.

Buying fair-trade gifts and celebrating Christmas within the context of the Christian year are but two humble, yet promising, practices for energizing our observance of this holy day and disentangling it from consumerism. They can help us transform our cluttered celebrations and make plain to our culture the Infant’s star, which always shines.

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION ON FAIR TRADE**

For over fifty years the fair trade movement has been helping consumers locate products from companies that deal fairly with their producers. The movement began after World War II when churches sold handcrafts made by refugees in Europe. The official certification of fair trade products

began in the Netherlands in 1988 as a response to plummeting prices in the world coffee market. The Max Havelaar Foundation formed that year and began offering a “Fair Trade” label to any coffee company willing to trade a portion of their volume on fair trade terms. Today, Fair Trade certified products such as coffee, bananas, tea, chocolate, honey, sugar, and orange juice are available in stores throughout Europe and the U.S.

The following organizations provide updated information on fair trade products and retailers: International Federation of Alternative Trade ([www.ifat.org](http://www.ifat.org)), Transfair USA ([www.transfairusa.org](http://www.transfairusa.org)), Fair Trade Federation ([www.fairtradefederation.org](http://www.fairtradefederation.org)), Co-op America ([www.sweatshops.org](http://www.sweatshops.org)), SERVV International ([www.servv.org](http://www.servv.org)), Ten Thousand Villages ([www.villages.ca](http://www.villages.ca)), and Equal Exchange ([www.equalexchange.com](http://www.equalexchange.com)).

## NOTES

1 Scott Cairns, *Philokalia* (Lincoln, NB: Zoo Press, 2002), 117. Reprinted with permission of the author and Zoo Press.

2 Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 176.

3 On the nineteenth century, see Nissenbaum’s *The Battle for Christmas*. For the story in the twentieth century, see Richard Horsley and James Tracy’s *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001).

4 Horsley and Tracy, *Christmas Unwrapped*, 5.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.

6 Stanley Hauerwas, “No Enemy, No Christianity: Theology and Preaching Between Worlds” in Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz, eds., *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jurgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 32.

7 Brueggemann explores these two prophetic tasks in *The Prophetic Imagination*.

8 These seven practices are the criteria for membership in the Fair Trade Federation ([www.fairtradefederation.org/memcrit.html](http://www.fairtradefederation.org/memcrit.html), accessed August 28, 2003).

9 Norman H. Maring, *The Christian Calendar in the Free Churches* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1967), 10.

10 Rodney Clapp, *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 81.

11 Little consensus about Jesus’ birth date existed in the church prior to this decision. For a detailed account, see Susan K. Roll’s *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995), and “Christmas,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume III ([www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm), accessed August 28, 2003).



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# Which Kingdom?

BY BARRY HARVEY

**If Christians conform to the expectations of a consumerist culture that bears little resemblance to the ways of the kingdom inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, they may pledge allegiance to Christ with their lips while their daily practices promote a very different set of loyalties, virtues, and convictions.**

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**W**e are all “born consumers,” for we must consume in order to live: we must eat and drink, clothe ourselves, and find shelter. Unfortunately, it seems most of us also live in order to consume. The institutions and practices of capitalism have orchestrated our day-to-day existence around habits of consumption that no longer serve any higher purpose, but have become ends in themselves, to be desired for their own sake. Not only are these habits out of proportion to what we need to flourish as creatures made in the image of God, they transform the character of our relationships with others. It is no longer uncommon to hear that a friendship, marriage, or even a relationship with God is just another good or service to enhance one’s preferred lifestyle.

Of course, as Christians we feel some discontent with consumerism. We recognize that the latest upgrade in mobile telephones or the newest fashion statement will not satisfy our heart’s deep desire, and that impulses to buy these are ultimately incompatible with a life of discipleship. But any suggestion that consumerism and capitalism are inseparable makes us supremely uncomfortable. What we tend to hear from church leaders, denominational study groups, and ethicists, or rather, what we *want* to hear from them, are moralistic critiques targeting individuals: if only we were less materialistic, families made better choices, and individuals lived more simply, everyone would be happier and society would be healthier.

But according to the three books reviewed here, the church itself is perpetuating profligate habits of consumption. It is failing to come to terms with how contemporary capitalism needs ever-increasing levels of buying, spending, and borrowing to function smoothly, and how ardent capitalists mobilize vast resources to cultivate in us rampant consumer desires.

What's at stake in the confrontation between consumer capitalism and the body of Christ, agree Philip D. Kenneson (a Protestant in the Free

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**The church must cultivate practices that curb the authority of the marketplace. For example, when the body of Christ gathers to acknowledge God as creator and sustainer, it debunks the myth that we are self-sufficient, self-made persons.**

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Church tradition) and Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow, (Catholics influenced by the Catholic Worker Movement), is not a particular interpretation of the gospel or church tradition as such. It is instead the continued existence of the church as faithful witness to the mission and character of God, and with it the capacity to think, imagine, desire, and

act in ways formed by the biblical story. In Kenneson's words, if Christians conform to the expectations of a consumerist culture that bears little resemblance to the ways of the kingdom inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, they may pledge allegiance to Christ with their lips while their daily practices promote a very different set of loyalties, virtues, and convictions.

The church, write Budde and Brimlow, has always relied on social practices of formation that were distinct from the non-Christian world to maintain the biblical character of its fellowship and the integrity of its witness. If this distance from the dominant culture is compromised, the social space that the body of Christ needs to reproduce itself quickly collapses. To be sure, the process of Christian formation has always been a precarious one, but in our time and place it is being undermined or diluted by powerful capitalist institutions and processes that form human affections, dispositions, desires, and practices in ways antithetical to Christian discipleship. The two modes of formation, Christian and capitalist, because they seek to form persons to act in accordance with certain social ends, are fundamentally incompatible.

#### **FRUIT THAT BRINGS LIFE**

Kenneson, in *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999; 246 pp., \$15.00), contrasts virtues that bear witness to the reconciling presence of God in the



world, with those dominant cultural dispositions, convictions, and desires that inhibit the cultivation of the Christian virtues. He devotes nine chapters to the “fruit of the Spirit” that the Apostle Paul lists in his Epistle to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5:22–23a). For example, the theological character of love—unmerited, steadfast, long-suffering, boundless, and other-directed—is juxtaposed with the self-interested and cost-oriented tendencies fostered by the sorts of exchange that take place in the global market. The virtue of peace (which in Scripture refers to a condition of wholeness, harmony, and well-being that is inherently social, rather than a psychological state of serenity) stands over against the compartmentalization, isolation, and fragmentation of a life ordered around conspicuous consumption and the instant satisfaction of ephemeral desires.

If Christians are to be set free from bondage to the all-consuming power of market capitalism, Kenneson argues, the church needs to cultivate the sorts of practices, convictions, institutions, and narratives that can curb the authority of the marketplace, while at the same time fostering the virtues of the Christian life. He identifies corporate worship as a potentially fruitful resource for both of these tasks, providing a foothold for the activity of the Spirit that can then be nurtured and expanded to embrace the rest of our lives. With respect to the virtue of kindness, for example, when the body of Christ gathers to acknowledge God as creator and sustainer, it debunks the myth that we are self-sufficient, self-made persons. We are reminded that since our welfare is utterly dependent on the kindness of God, this same disposition should characterize our dealings with one another.

#### **DISNEYED TO DEATH**

Complimenting Kenneson’s focus on the fruit of the Spirit, Michael Budde’s *The (Magic) Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997; 177 pp., \$28.00) tracks the impact of the dominant cultural actors in society, the so-called “culture industries” like Disney’s Magic Kingdom, on the church’s ability to form disciples in the way of Jesus. These industries—which include not only the producers of movies, television, and popular music, but also the distribution systems, data processing networks, and marketing and advertising firms—account for the majority of the world’s output of shared images, stories, information, news, and entertainment. Their handiwork exerts an inordinate influence on what people value as normal, erotic, or repulsive.

Budde takes special aim at the roles that television, advertising, and marketing play. With titillating combinations of sight and sound, evocative appeals to the emotions rather than to the intellect, and a never-ending stream of images and ideas, television is the cornerstone of the culture industries’ global expansion. Television intrudes into nearly every space of

everyday life, crowding out other formative influences in the lives of young people, including the church. The screen's ceaseless flow of images also reconfigures our sense of time. The past as a living memory is constantly surpassed and made obsolete, while at the same time television recycles selected bits and pieces of life (ideas, images, clothing, places) in new and decontextualized combinations.

Marketing and advertising also serve crucial functions in the hegemony of global culture industries. Not only has advertising penetrated into virtually every aspect of our lives over the last few decades, it also has changed its focus by moving away from product-oriented ads and toward a buyer-centered, image-related approach. In a process known as fragmentation, images, ideas, and personalities are extricated from their conventional referents, and then recombined and reshuffled to confer novel meanings to products and consumption opportunities. Advertising seeks to mold attitudes and behaviors by associating these products and services with seductive images and ideas, typically by playing on our anxieties about our appearance to and acceptability among our peers. Over time, it strives to re-create lifestyles, identities, and social networks around these webs of association.

In *Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business is Buying the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2002; 191 pp., \$22.99), Budde and Brimlow identify other points of contention between Christianity and capitalism. They are particularly concerned with what they call "institutional cross-dressing," in which churches imitate the tools and values of for-profit corporations. Business firms, meanwhile, exploit religious and specifically Christian symbols, images, stories, and patterns of meaning in their pursuit of improving the bottom line. At the top of Budde and Brimlow's list is the recent trend on the part of corporations to use techniques of "spirituality" to reawaken a sense of unity and purpose among employees who are overworked, alienated from management due to downsizing, and cynical about their prospects for the future. This new form of civil religion perpetuates the mistaken assumption that to be "useful" the church must be society's "chaplain," helping people to perform their "duties" as defined by the secular *status quo*. It also threatens to become, in some contexts, a secular equivalent of a religious community, tacitly socializing individuals to conform to the expectations of the workplace.

Budde and Brimlow also turn a critical eye on what they call the "death industry," the corporate transformation of funerals, burials, memorials, and other aspects of death and bereavement. A handful of corporations have bought or forced out of business locally-owned funeral homes, cemeteries, and related industries, resulting in skyrocketing prices and profit margins. This move to industrialize death brings these firms squarely into conflict with a key ministry in the church, for they remove death from the

larger context of the gospel (with its proclamation of life, death, and resurrection) and situate it within the dominant culture's therapeutic techniques of grief management. In the process death seems both more tragic and more final.

Another concern is the way many churches imitate the techniques and tactics of the culture industries, especially advertising and marketing. This parodying of the dominant culture effectively, though perhaps unwittingly, transforms the body of Christ into yet another culture industry, one more vendor of products and services for mass consumption. Church activities, convictions, architecture, and liturgy are routinely refitted to accord with the preferences of "target populations" who have been raised to think of themselves almost exclusively as self-interested consumers. Budde and Brimlow contrast this trend with the process of formation practiced in the early church, when it was understood that making disciples took significant amounts of time and effort, and a social space that was free from the overweening influence of the dominant culture.

Readers will look in vain in these three books for any sort of affirmation of capitalism. Budde and Brimlow in particular have very little sympathy with recent attempts by Catholic and Protestant theologians to promote economic freedom that is properly constrained by so-called "Christian values." They contend that these efforts invariably align the life of the church with the goals

and institutions of liberal democratic capitalism. Rather, part of the mission of the church is to be the bearer of "a set of economic practices, ideas, and relationships supportive of the proper ends of the church, which is the kingdom of God as it unfolds in human history" (p. 157). Church soup kitchens, for instance, demonstrate an economy of sharing that stands in contrast to the self-interest and self-preservation advocated in contemporary capitalism; in the process these ministries proclaim genuinely good news to the poor.

## CONCLUSION

Kenneson, Budde, and Brimlow challenge us to think about the seductive nature of consumer capitalism and the troubling influence the culture industries exert in our own lives, but this will not come easily for many of

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**As churches imitate the techniques of the culture industries, especially advertising and marketing, their activities, convictions, architecture, and liturgy are refitted for the preferences of "target populations" who have been raised to think of themselves as self-interested consumers.**

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us. In a post-cold war age, thinking critically about capitalism sounds foolish at best and seditious at worst. We shy away from anything that might require a break with its basic premises. This reticence has only become more pronounced after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. In the days and weeks that followed, the airwaves and print media were filled with ads elevating conspicuous consumption to a quasi-patriotic duty. These appeals for all good Americans to return to habits of unrestrained consumption are far more revealing about ourselves and our world than we might like to think.

Perhaps the most intriguing question, say Budde and Brimlow, “is not whether capitalist culture will continue to shape hearts and imaginations more thoroughly than the Way of the Cross, but whether the church will produce people able to tell the difference between the two” (p. 82).

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# Curing Our Affluenza

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

Consumerism has an ambiguous, even destructive, legacy: it has provided status and freedom to some, but has not been successful in treating change and uncertainty, inequality and division. As these books discover, our “affluenza”—a feverish obsession to consume material goods—is not healthy for us or the creation as a whole. Its cure is not a call to dour asceticism, but rather an invitation to receive God’s extravagant grace.

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Nearly two hundred years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America* that Americans, though living among the happiest circumstances of any people in the world, are followed by a cloud that habitually hangs over their heads, a cloud that makes them serious, even sad, in the midst of their pleasures. Though they have cause for celebration, they never stop thinking of “the good things they have not got.” Consequently, they pursue prosperity with a “feverish ardor,” tormented by the suspicion that they have not chosen the quickest or shortest path to get it. “They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight.”

Were he alive today, de Tocqueville would not need to change his words very much, perhaps adding only that the intensity of our ardor, the scope of our clutching, and the depth of our loss have increased substantially.

Having been advised by countless spiritual guides that money and the pursuit of material comfort will not bring us happiness, why do we still maintain this ambition as a personal, even national, quest? What is becom-

ing clear to many in our society is that consumerism is not healthy for us or for the creation as a whole, and that it leads to anxiety, stress, boredom, and indigestion, all maladies with tremendous personal and social costs. Social commentators like John de Graaf have gone so far as to diagnose our condition as “affluenza,” an epidemic of consumption analogous to past health epidemics like the plague.<sup>†</sup> Yet we, churchgoers included, continue

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**As consumerism 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.**

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in our consumptive ways, perhaps harboring the secret hope that we will escape ill-health and ultimately be satisfied.

Anyone wishing to understand the complex array of personal, social, economic, and political factors that contribute to the continuing success of consumerism as a way of life, should begin with the excellent, multi-layered

history found in Gary Cross’s *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, 320 pp., \$18.50). The great merit of this book is that it characterizes consumerism as a social and political force. Unlike many critics who simply reduce consumerism to the individual pursuit of material comfort, and thus bankrupt on spiritual grounds, Cross casts it as a compelling ideology that concretely expresses the major ideals that have guided the last century: liberty and democracy. “Consumer goods allowed Americans to free themselves from their old, relatively secure but closed communities and enter the expressive individualism of a dynamic ‘mass’ society” (2). 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.

Cross’s characterization of consumerism as an ideology in competition with other “isms” like communism is particularly helpful because it broadens our understanding of the many practical functions and roles consumerism plays in culture—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. In a time when the workplace,

ethnic solidarity, tradition, or political representation often fail to give meaning and dignity to people, consumerism has shown itself to be an attractive alternative that meets immediate needs, eases social tensions, and gives concrete shape to life's major transitions.

This historical background about how consumerism shaped American society should not be read as an unqualified endorsement of it. Cross is fully prepared to admit that consumerism leaves an ambiguous, even destructive, legacy. 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.

Cross concludes his book not optimistic that all-embracing consumerism will come to an end anytime soon, for it is simply too successful at helping people cope with change and uncertainty, too valuable in redressing social inequality and division. And so, barring economic or environmental collapse, consumerism likely will continue to thrive. The jeremiads invoked against consumerism will hardly register on the cultural map.

Both Arthur Simon, author of *How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003, 192 pp., \$11.99), and Michael Schut, editor of *Simpler Living Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective* (Denver, CO: Living the Good News, 1999, 296 pp., \$14.95), are convinced that Cross's concluding prediction is incorrect. Their books are compelling because they are not written as jeremiads. Calmly, and sometimes beautifully, they show that consumerism, in the end, is not successful in treating change and uncertainty, inequality and division. In fact, when the church is faithful to the mission of Christ it produces personal and social well-being that far surpasses the gains of consumerism. The call away from consumerism is not a call to dour asceticism, but rather an invitation to joy, an invitation to receive, as Simon says, God's extravagant grace.

Simon, who is the founder and now president emeritus of Bread for the World, a Christian lobby group advocating for the poor and hungry of the world, starts with a rather unsettling observation: in desiring to be part of mainstream culture the church has become affluent, a willing partner in the consumption-driven American Dream, and thus hostile to the ways of Jesus. When we consider how comfortable and luxurious our lives currently are, it is simply scandalous how little we give to others around the world who are often in desperate need. Simon is not calling us to vows of poverty. Rather, we are to give out of our abundance and live more simply and intentionally so that others can have basic needs met.



At root our problem is one of distrust. We do not really believe that God has and will continue to provide for us. We live, as de Tocqueville suggested, on the assumption that we have to take care of ourselves, and do everything in our power to secure our lives, for no one else will. This is a losing battle because as prisoners of mammon (money becomes mammon when its acquisition gets in the way of or overrides compassionate giving) we participate in the “myth of scarcity” that tells us we can never have enough. This attitude is in direct opposition to the faithful discipleship to which Christ called us: to belong to Christ is to live out a new identity in which the cares of God, rather than self-care, are the determining focus. To the extent that we keep our focus on God we will build caring communities that preclude the problems consumerism is well-designed to address, problems like loneliness, anxiety, boredom, and fear. Our actions, however, indicate that we really do not believe that God will take care of us.

As we truly enter into the body of Christ, the patterns of our lives should shift from getting to giving. Our model for this life, of course, is God, who gave extravagantly in the creation itself, and continues to give in the redemptive life of the Son and Holy Spirit. God desires that we experience pleasure and enjoyment, but this joy cannot be authentic if it is premised on economic injustice and personal or social suffering. This is why Simon points us repeatedly to the social and political dimensions of Christian living. Christian life is lived outward, which means that it is directed to others in acts of sharing, encouragement, and mutual upbuilding. As we are transformed into the nature of Christ, our very being and presence on earth will bring glory to God. “Power used selfishly is power corrupted. Ability wasted is power corrupted. But opportunity to do good, received as a trust from God and exercised to help others, is power ennobled” (100).

Simon recognizes that we cannot live this faithful life alone. We need the support and guidance of church communities. Above all, we need to steep our lives in prayer, and give our fears and insecurities over to God. To help us see how this all works, Simon intersperses his book with numerous personal examples of people who make the transition from fretful consumerism to faithful, abundant living. He also concludes with several practical suggestions like turning off the TV and developing more responsible home budgets.

*Simpler Living Compassionate Life* is a collection of essays designed to move us from the frenzy and pain of the rat race to the enjoyment and celebration of all creation. Authors as diverse as Frederick Buechner, Juliet Schor, Henri Nouwen, Wendell Berry, John Cobb, Richard Foster, and Calvin DeWitt, lead us into a deep and far-ranging exploration into how we experience time, money, work, food, our bodies, and the places we live. They challenge us to think spiritually about what these things mean, with the overall aim of bringing our aspirations and fears into dialogue with a Christian understanding.



For example, consider the biblical teaching of creation. On this view, all that we enjoy, even ourselves, are gifts that come from the unfathomable love of God. The grasping, clutching character of our lives indicates that we have not really appreciated this teaching. We know this because we have bought into the consumerist mind-set that keeps us forever unsatisfied and ungrateful—this is why we are constantly looking for more. But if we did appreciate creation for what it is, a blessed landscape of generosity, then our work, eating, friendships, and playing would be concrete expressions of gratitude. Our church communities would become great witnesses to the friendship and grace of God.

One of the strengths of this book is that it includes a study guide, designed flexibly to fit a four-, six-, eight-, or twelve-week schedule of church Sunday school or group discussion. Participants will benefit immensely from the very helpful exercises and discussion prompted by the reading. Moreover, they will learn to develop practical steps that will move personal and church life closer to what God desires. Michael Schut, who works with Earth Ministry in Seattle, Washington, an organization devoted to mobilizing churches to become better stewards of creation, designed the book as a resource to help laypeople live a more compassionate Christian life. In this task he has succeeded admirably.

Consumerism, as these and many other books indicate, is clearly a growing cultural concern. It is also a very complex affair, touching people on a variety of levels. If the church is to play a leading role in returning us to health (one of the root meanings of salvation), it must first understand why consumerism is so very attractive, and then come to terms with its complicity in this phenomenon. Having done this, the church will be better positioned to preach and model the truly abundant life that Jesus promised to all who follow in his ways.

#### NOTE

†For many useful statistics about the pace and direction of consumerism, see John De Graaf's excellent television documentaries, *Affluenza* (1997) and *Escape from Affluenza* (1998), available through Bullfrog Films, and accompanying book written with David Wann and Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2001).



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