

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.

We 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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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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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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