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Consumerism

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There is a pervasive and persistent force working in American culture that is undermining individuals, disintegrating families and communities, and sapping the church of its influence and relevance. That force is consumerism.

Consumerism is more than materialism, consumerism is an ideology of which materialism is merely a component; it is a way of thinking that has become a principle basis for how many Americans understand life and view themselves. By definition, consumerism is a cultural phenomenon resulting from the systematic creation and fostering of the *desire* to possess material goods and personal success in ever-greater amounts. The net result is a cultural mindset that seeks an idealized "lifestyle" that promises a better life to all who work hard enough. This "better life," according to its devotees, can be achieved by temporal means through the improvement of one's self-image. While there is nothing wrong with a healthy self-image, there is something inherently destructive about an image of one's self that is rooted solely in physical appearance, social status, or material success. In such a system, human persons are in essence reduced to objects whose value is determined by "having" and not that of "being."

The late Pope John Paul II regarded consumerism as "a threat to the freedom of the human person to live according

to the higher demands of love rather than to the lower pull of material desires." Christian theology teaches that it is not the possession of material goods alone or the desire for a better life that is sinful. Rather it is possessing, including the *desire* to possess, without regard for the appropriate hierarchy of the material goods one has and the subordination of those goods to their proper place. Material goods and resources should remain subservient to man and available to support his service to his neighbor.

Consumerism also posits that this "better life" can be achieved through increased financial security, which promises greater freedom to enjoy life, reduced worry, and increased stability. Often, this desire leads to a validation of every decision that places career choices above everything else. For example, we do not hesitate to relocate our families for the "right opportunity," often leaving extended family behind and depriving our children of multi-generational influences. We are the most transient society on earth; we are consumerist nomads in continual search for greener pastures, and this nomadic condition works to disintegrate families and communities by severing familial and community roots. We seem to be a people who are always on our way to somewhere else, never content with where we are.

This is evidenced in the fact that the average length of home ownership in America is approximately six years, by far the shortest duration in the world.

Another area affected is that the barrier that once insulated family time from employment demands is eliminated. We do not hesitate to travel on Sunday, for example, in order to make that Monday morning meeting or stay over Saturday on out-of-town business to reduce airfare expense. American workers are working more hours than ever before, and the growing expectation among employers is: "If you want to get ahead, you'll do what needs to be done, otherwise you lack commitment and your career here is over."

According to a study by the Economic Policy Institute, "the average hours worked by *all* family members is up 11 percent since 1975," and according to the Bureau of Labor, 32.8

percent of all full-time employees worked on weekends and holidays.

The shield which once existed between the demands of the marketplace and the obligations of family is gone. The marketplace reigns supreme, and therefore if family and marketplace come into conflict, the family must give way, and the rationale is that it is ultimately for the good of the family.

Americans suffer spiritually and emotionally as well. Given the extraordinary time pressures on families today and often-misplaced priorities, there is less time for involvement in the community of believers. Church attendance has reached an all-time low in America (42 percent, according to Barna Research, and declining). And to make matters even worse, many people today who find themselves slaves to consumerism have come to see that despite having achieved the promised lifestyle, it has failed to produce the promised benefits. These discontent consumerists will often go to "religion" in search of meaning and purpose. Unfortunately, many are only looking to give their "lifestyle" meaning and purpose, and they think that by integrating "a little Jesus" into their lives they will then balance and perfect the lifestyle, never realizing that it is not their lifestyle that is in need of salvation, it is their very life itself.

Often Christians will respond to the forces of consumerism with an increased effort to integrate the spiritual disciplines: scheduled prayer and "quiet time," regular Bible study, and so forth. These are fine, but they can seek to emphasize spiritual works rather than addressing the root issue, which is ultimately the discipline of our appetites and learning to be content with what we have and where we are in life.

Emotionally, Americans are more "disconnected" than ever. The Dartmouth School of Medicine recently completed a study entitled, "Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities." The study reported that "a great deal of evidence [now] shows that we are hardwired for close attachments to other people, beginning with our mothers, fathers, and extended family, and then moving out

to the broader community." The report concludes, "The *fundamental* problem in today's society, especially among young people, [is a] lack of connectedness—connectedness to other people and to a sense of transcendent meaning or purpose."

With the increased priority given to the marketplace, there follows a decreased commitment to neighbors, community, and connections to extended family; children are displaced in pursuit of "opportunities," and familial priorities become subverted to company demands. What is perhaps most disturbing is that too many Christians are compliant in this subversion of family to work by both their unquestioning participation as employees and the imposition of these values as employers.

The *American Journal of Sociology* states that "since 1969 the time American parents spend with their children has declined by 22 hours per week"! We talk of family values, but we evidently do not value family. We value material and career success—we are slaves to consumerism!

Reflecting upon the post-Christian landscape of the late twentieth century, Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer observed that after the "death of God" and the resulting loss of absolute truth and moral values, modern society would be left with only the two terrible "values" of "personal peace and personal prosperity." Schaeffer went on to say that once these values became accepted, Americans would sacrifice everything to protect their personal peace and affluence, including their children and their grandchildren. Again, it is the "lifestyle" that is desperately sought and that must be preserved at all costs, and everything revolves around this aim.

Furthermore, consumerism shifts the object of human life from cultivating virtue and character, knowing truth and being content, to this artificially constructed and idealized "lifestyle" that is continually reinforced through media, entertainment, and advertising. Again, "things" take priority over persons, and "having" supersedes being, and in so doing we become a superficial culture filled with distractions that inhibit introspective thought and meaningful relationships.

In commenting on the lack of introspection by men, Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century mathematician and

philosopher, wrote: "All they [unbelieving men] know is that when [they] leave this world [they] shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be [their] lot for eternity. . . . The only conclusion [they] can draw from all this is that [they] must pass [their] days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen. . . . The only good thing for [such men], therefore, is to be diverted so that [they] will stop thinking about [their] circumstances."

Indeed, we live in a world rife with distraction, especially when one considers that the average American is bombarded with an average of three thousand product ads per day. According to Barry Schwartz, a psychologist at Swarthmore College and author of *The Paradox of Choice*, "American life is flooded with too many choices. The result is a society of stressed out and unsatisfied customers." Of course, this dissatisfaction is rooted in the misguided pursuit of "things."

Dr. David G. Myers reported in *American Psychologist*:

> Compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathology. . . . Our becoming much better off over the last four decades has not been accompanied by one iota of increased subjective well-being.

Consumerism creates and encourages human desire for temporal goods and for the sense of well-being that the acquisition and possession of those goods can provide. We are conditioned to never be satisfied with sufficiency but to "be all that we can be" through the endless development of talent and productivity. Thus, we cannot rest with the good but always want more. Perhaps the strongest expression of this within the church is the idea that to be content is to "settle for less," which we condemn as lazy, defeatist, and even irresponsible. Some will vigorously defend their devotion to success as "doing all things to the glory of God," or as in the name of God-honoring excellence.

There is no question that Christianity teaches personal responsibility and the idea of doing our very best in everything that we do; this does not, however, exclude our responsibilities as husbands, wives, and parents. Nor does this preclude our responsibilities as "prophets, priests, and kings." Interestingly, those who argue this line of thinking seem always to limit their efforts for excellence to the marketplace.

The consumerist tells himself that if he just works harder, he will be able to make time for family, leisure, and himself later. The religious consumerist is convinced that by working harder he will be able to "make time for God," but fears that any "slacking off" his manic pace is a failure to "use God's gifts." In an essay on Christian asceticism, Timothy Vaverek, a Catholic priest, writes that "love of God has come to mean giving thanks for His gifts by maximizing productive 'self-actualization,' while love of neighbor has come to mean providing them with consumer goods." Contrary to the consumerist adage that says he needs to "be all that he can be," he simply needs to be what God wants him to be.

The result is a nation of people overwhelmed by the tyranny of the urgent, watching in disbelief as one week goes into the next, then one month, then two, then three, until years have passed, and that promised lifestyle still eludes them. In the end, they are left with the realization that their life amounts to nothing more than work; they have drifted apart in their relationships; their children are grown and gone; and they have waited for that elusive goal of "everything accomplished," so they could start "enjoying life"—only to realize that life has passed them by.

In living this way, we are living less than we were designed to, and our focus is in all the wrong areas. For the Christian consumerist, their lives are little different from the world, and this lack of "counter-cultural" living validates the unbelieving world's rejection of the gospel. Unbelievers observe, "Christians don't live any different than I do, so how can this Jesus be real if he doesn't make any difference in their lives?"

As Christians, we are to resist worldliness and completely reorient our goals, priorities, and thinking. Christians are

expected to humanize society by bringing love and hope to a fallen world. They should not be participating in the very dehumanization that results from and is fostered by consumerist thinking and living.

It is possible that this uniquely American phenomenon may be contributing to so much resentment around the world. We once exported missionaries in unparalleled number, and fortunately still do to a large extent, but more and more we are exporting consumerist ideology—an ideology that ultimately is at odds with Christianity. My missionary friends tell me that this paradox of American ideological export only adds to their challenges.

With the increase of "globalization," American corporations now see the world only in terms of markets and consumers. More and more we are telling impoverished peoples in third world countries that they too can have a better life through the acquisition of the right soft drinks, clothing, and sneakers. This is powerfully reinforced through the exportation of Hollywood films, which, according to Michael Medved, now receive more than 70 percent of their revenue from countries outside the United States. When this is coupled with the sexualized messages common to Hollywood films, it doesn't make for the best representation of American ideals.

We have already demonstrated our willingness to separate trade policy from human rights policy in order to gain potential market opportunities, as in the case of China. This is why more and more nations consider us so hypocritical—we think we're "good" and everyone should have what we have; however, when we turn a blind eye to human suffering and oppression, because we are more concerned about economic benefits, we surrender the moral high ground.

Again, "things" rise above people, and compassion is subverted by profit. If Christians want the world to take seriously the claims of Christ, then we must work to advance policies, both foreign and domestic, that prioritize people and moral good over economic desires. This applies both to governmental policies and to the personal and corporate practices of the church.

I hasten to add that I do not write as one who is above—and therefore immune—to the pull of consumerism. Quite the contrary, as a former corporate CEO, I confess that I was once very much in the grip of consumerist thinking. I bought into this seduction even to the point of treating my relationship with Christ as a mere "component" of my life. I too was diligent in my "Christian walk." I confess, however, that my expectation was that Christ would come alongside *my* life plans and *my* objectives and "bless" them. In essence, I was seeking divine blessing of my consumerist lifestyle. Christ did not come to be a "component" of our lives but the all-encompassing *purpose* and Lord of our lives. I had to subordinate my life, my goals, and my plans to his lordship and be willing to accept his will, no matter what may come.

I am not naïve regarding the enormous challenges associated with breaking out of the grip of consumerism; it has taken time, along with numerous practical and often difficult steps, to simplify my life. I had to discover that my satisfaction and being was entirely in him. In practical terms, this involved downsizing homes and cars, generally reducing all expenses, eliminating consumer debt and credit cards, ridding my home of cable television (a major distraction from meaningful things), and carefully guarding my and my family's time.

The bottom line is that we must be willing to embrace a form of Christian asceticism. Before you panic, I am not speaking in the same degree as a twelfth-century monk but rather in the pursuit of simplicity in all things. This includes how and on what we spend our money, our time, and our energy. We must reorient our priorities: toward growing in the knowledge of and devotion to God; toward being content with financial sufficiency and no longer always yearning for more and borrowing to buy what we have not earned; toward devoting ourselves to our spouses and the nurture and training of our children; toward abandoning a sense of self that is rooted in the thoughts of others and instead finding our "self" in the imitation of Christ and his character.

The Christian life compels us to respond to God's love by daily imitating the self-emptying love of Christ. Through self-denial the Christian turns away from the nonessential desires of his will and his flesh, being content with God's will for his life. Through prayer he seeks deeper communion with God and the grace to persevere in the narrow path of self-sacrificial love. Through works of mercy and charity the Christian not only shares material goods with others but also pours himself out on their behalf. It is only when we, as Christians, abandon the lure of the world and its empty promises, and unreservedly commit ourselves to the higher call of Christ, that the world will see the glory of God in and through his church.

G. K. Chesterton wrote, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." In the case of consumerism, the Christian ideal is indeed difficult, especially when the whole current of our age combines to press us into the never-ending quest to desire, acquire, and accomplish. In such an age it is difficult to "be still and know that he is God."

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