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BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONSUMERISM

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CONSIDERING CONSUMERISM¹

While this essay was in gestation, The Guardian ran a piece with the eye-catching headline: ‘Goodbye to Curtains and Clutter: How We Learned to Buy Less Stuff’.² The article suggested that the consumer boom is—if not exactly over—then at least slowing down:

[T]his week, the Office for National Statistics reported that the amount of material consumed in the UK has fallen from a peak of 889.9m tonnes in 2001 (15.1 tonnes per person) to 659.1m tonnes (10.3 tonnes per person) in 2013. Material consumption was lowest in 2011, at 642.0m tonnes (10.1 tonnes per person).

We are, it seems, spending less on ‘stuff’. Yet, there is that line about ‘lies and statistics’. What do these numbers really mean? At one level, they suggest we’re spending more on ‘non-physical’ items: on downloads rather than DVDs, on ‘experiences’ rather than at Ikea. Tell your friends that your weekend project is to get down to some serious ‘de-cluttering’, and you’ll get nods of approval for your wisdom.

According to this Guardian article, however, it’s not as simple as that: it’s not simply that we’re purchasing less. It is more that our consumerist impulses are simply finding new modes of expression—not only eschewing commodity for culture, but buying quality (visit ‘Buy Me Once.com’, strap-line: ‘love things that last’!) instead of quantity, and spending more for ‘sustainable’ products. The stories are told of the city of Hamburg’s radical measures to reduce its environmental waste, and of then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s targeting in 2008 of “‘unnecessary” food purchases’ to cut down on astonishing levels of food waste. Clearly, consumerism and how we think about it remains a prominent theme for con-

¹ This paper was delivered on 4 April 2016 at the SETS Annual Conference. It retains the informal style of presentation, lightly revised for publication.

² Stuart Jeffries and Paula Coccozza, ‘Goodbye to Curtains and Clutter: How We Learned to Buy Less Stuff’, *The Guardian* (1 March 2016) <<http://gu.com/p/4h7j2/sbl>>, accessed 3 April 2016.

temporary society. And even if some forms of consumption are tailing off (though as the Guardian piece makes clear, even that is strongly contested), other forms are still flourishing.

But what is this thing, ‘consumerism’, that we are devoting energy (and time, and money) to considering over these days? Is consumerism just another way of talking about greed or acquisitiveness? The story of origins is complex, with competing starting points from the eighteenth, to the seventeenth century, to the Middle Ages, and with differing dynamics identified as giving rise to the modern consumerist landscape.³ Spatially, too, consumerism has been seen as European cascading from the elites to ‘lower’ social groups. But these behaviours can be observed, too, in non-Western cultures and at many times. As Peter Stearns notes:⁴

Aristocracies quite commonly evolve from warrior qualities to what might be called consumerism; the process is familiar in Roman, Arab, and Chinese history, as well as in Western history by the later Middle Ages. We don’t tend to call the result consumerist, but the label is not actually inappropriate.

And yet, there is something essentially ‘Western’ about consumerism. Kenneth Himes notes the hostility that non-Western cultures express against it—although this, too, might be more complex than it seems at first blush.⁵

Himes goes on to outline ‘spheres of meaning’ in which consumerism has been discussed, as ‘social movement’, ‘ideology’, and ‘way of life’ (p. 133). While these boundaries are a bit porous, they are still suggestive, although I have found it helpful to think in terms of ‘behaviours’ rather than simply abstract definitions. Consumerism involves participation in the ‘market’, implying a complex system of supply and demand, with focus of consumerism on the consumer(!) rather than the producer. A consumer acquires goods or services out of an exercise of choice (and an outlay of cash—or card) which enhances status and contributes, therefore, to identity. This is something different, then, from traditional village culture where some of these same dynamics are at work (though perhaps

³ See in brief, Frank Trentmann, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. by Frank Trentmann (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 1–19 (pp. 4–5 in particular).

⁴ Peter Stearns, ‘Teaching Consumerism in World History’, *World History Connected*, 1.2 <<http://goo.gl/sPgoGv>>, para. 5. More expansive treatment is found in his major work, *Consumerism in World History*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁵ Kenneth R. Himes, ‘Consumerism and Christian Ethics’, *Theological Studies* 68 (2007), 132–53 (see p. 137).

in less significant ways that some accounts might suggest—Stearns, at least, is open to this kind of comparison).

CONSIDERING CAMPBELL'S 'COMMON CRITICISMS' CRITIQUE

As Stearns remarks: 'It's easy to be critical: consumerism is inherently selfish, hedonistic, and often trite.'⁶ Consideration of a 'biblical perspective' on consumerism should not be satisfied with cheap critique. Thus, as a way into biblical engagement with consumerism, I will consider the sustained critique that Colin Campbell offered of its most common criticisms.⁷ The criticisms are inter-related; strikingly, all of Campbell's major themes appear in the Guardian article which introduced this essay. They are five in number: (1) Need; (2) Materialism; (3) Addiction; (4) Selfishness; and (5) Happiness. Others might be added, especially more recently the linkage forged between consumerism and the exploitation and destruction of the environment—that is, the 'environmental' critique,⁸ following Campbell's pattern.

(1) *Need*

Campbell begins by challenging the notion that consumerism fuels gratuitous acquisitiveness, impelling us to possess things that we 'don't really need' (p. 281). Well-stocked charity shops serve as evidence of consumer realization of precisely this kind of excess. From burgers to BMWs, consumers go well beyond what is needed for some purpose, whether that is eating to live or meeting transport and commuting needs.

Such reasoning is difficult to sustain, argues Campbell. Since this sort of focus implies an 'end' which the 'need' is intended to meet, the intended critique simply becomes a battle of prejudices:

For the truth is that for anyone to attempt to specify what another person does or does not 'need', without a comprehensive knowledge of their background, personality, tastes, goals and ambitions, is simply to express a prejudice in favour of one specific conception of the good life. (p. 283)

⁶ Stearns, 'Teaching Consumerism', para. 10.

⁷ Colin Campbell, 'What Is Wrong with Consumerism? An Assessment of Some Common Criticisms', *Anuario Filosófico* 43 (2010), 279–97. Page citations in the main text refer to this article unless otherwise noted.

⁸ On this theme, cf. Pope Francis's second encyclical, *Laudato si'*, concerning the environment ('On Care for Our Common Home'), in which consumerism features heavily; <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html>.

Fundamentally, attempts to assess ‘need’ are expressions of what the analyst regards as legitimate satisfaction of desire—distinguishing ‘wants’, as opposed to ‘needs’—although Campbell argues that this assessment lacks any ‘clear basis’. Inevitably, he believes, this inclines the critic towards traditional or ‘neo-Puritan’ values.

The issue, then, revolves around conceptions of legitimate or appropriate satisfaction of need-based desire, rather than simply assuaging gratuitous wants. Campbell argues this critique is deeply flawed, and thus should be set aside. But a ‘biblical perspective’ encourages just this sort of problematizing. That is, a life shaped in accordance with the Christian scriptures will develop an inherent suspicion of needless acquisition. This stops short of dictating what is a permissible purchase, and what is not. But it does develop a healthy disposition to assess any acquisition in light of kingdom values.

Attacking the ‘excessive acquisition’ critique is a natural starting point for Campbell, and some of our biblical considerations here will apply equally to the other (related) criticisms of consumerism which he goes on to consider. I begin here, then, by noting the petition embedded in Lord’s Prayer for ‘our daily bread’ [*ton arton hēmōn ton epiousion*].⁹ No matter which of the contested meanings we adopt for this hapax, the prayer at least presumes that a fairly hand-to-mouth existence—much like Jesus’ own, one imagines—is the framework in which Jesus’ disciples are taught to pray for provision. There is also the striking preface to the prayer: ‘your Father knows what you need before you ask him’ (Matt. 6:8), which finds a further echo in Jesus’ counsel in Luke against material anxiety (Luke 12:22–34). What we are taught to pray for is precisely what is ‘needful’, no more, no less.

Such an attitude is further reflected in the NT’s consistent teaching on ‘contentment’, in relation to the *ark-* word group (‘to suffice’, ‘be sufficient’). So when soldiers asked John the Baptist for advice on how they might demonstrate the ‘fruits of repentance’, he replied: ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and **be content** with your wages’ (Luke 3:14, *arkeō*; also v. 8). Or Paul in Philippians 4:11, ‘Not

⁹ On the uncertainty over the *hapax legomenon* ‘epiousion’, and whether it means ‘daily bread’ or ‘bread for tomorrow’: B.M. Metzger, “How Many Times Does ΕΠΙΟΥΣΙΟΣ Occur outside The Lord’s Prayer?”, in *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), pp. 64–6 = *ExpTimes* 69 (1957–58), 52–54; M. Nijman and K.A. Worp, “ΕΠΙΟΥΣΙΟΣ” in a Documentary Papyrus?, *Novum Testamentum* 41 (1999), 231–34. On the translation problem, see also Bruce M. Metzger, ‘Persistent Problems Confronting Bible Translators’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993), 273–84 (see pp. 277–8).

that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to **be content** (*autarkēs*; also 1 Tim. 6:6–11a, for ‘godliness with contentment’ using *autarkeia*, with a warning against pursuit of wealth). Or perhaps most sharply for our concerns, in Hebrews 13:5, ‘Keep your life free from love of money, and **be content** with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you”’ (*arkeō*), combining just the set of considerations found in and around the Lord’s Prayer.

We do not arrive at these themes in the NT unprepared from the OT, of course. Proverbs has much to say concerning wealth and poverty, their causes and outcomes (often stated in provocative pairs: cf. e.g. Prov. 21:17, 20). One especially poignant statement which captures well both the desire for a secure life and a resistance to a wealthy one comes in Prov. 30:7–9, worth quoting in full:¹⁰

7 Two things I ask of you;
 deny them not to me before I die:
 8 Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
 give me neither poverty nor riches;
 feed me with the food that is needful for me,
 9 lest I be full and deny you
 and say, “Who is the Lord?”
 or lest I be poor and steal
 and profane the name of my God.

This list and reflection could be readily extended, but even these brief comments suggest that pausing to query the nature of acquisition—what I actually ‘need’ in the set of my ‘wants’—is biblically healthy. God did indeed create his human creatures to consume, but he did not create his human creatures to consume in an undisciplined, let alone rampant or thoughtless way, satisfying any desire that grew within them. Life in the Garden was no different.

(2) *Materialism*

If we were to play the word-association game, it’s quite possible that the prompt ‘consumerism’, would elicit the reply, ‘commodity’. Consumerism and ‘stuff’ are deeply interconnected in the Western perspective, perhaps best summed up in the slogan, ‘the one who dies with the most toys wins’.¹¹ The materialistic displacement of lively blessings inhering

¹⁰ Biblical quotations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ Often associated with the multi-millionaire Malcolm Forbes (1919–1990); see, e.g., Charles E. Cohen, ‘A Paladin of Publicity Bows Out in Grand Style’, *People* 33.11 (1990), 28–33; online at <<http://goo.gl/MSbDDZ>>; the first

in faith, hope, and love by mere things, commodities—or, simply put, of loving things more than people—makes an easy target in the critique of consumerism, and Campbell acknowledges its plausibility. But he pushes back effectively, noting to begin with the way in which services and the arts rank high in consumer spending, and that these could hardly be called ‘materialist’. He extends the argument by blurring the distinction between objets d’art and other work of ‘aesthetic significance’ (p. 287) on the one hand, and designer products on the other. While the latter might typify consumerist excess (a £100 ‘Porsche’ toaster?), objects in the former category fulfil a more noble role, adding meaning to life—and do not fall prey to the materialist critique.

This line of reasoning arrives at a similar conclusion as in the case of the ‘need’ criticism. That is, the grounds for distinguishing ‘aesthetic’ and ‘materialist’ impulses and activities are sufficiently obscure to be susceptible to mere prejudice, without firm criteria for arbitration. Who is to say that some museum piece possesses more aesthetic value than a finely crafted ... toaster? Cannot this kind of ‘purchase by consumers’, Campbell asks (p. 288), ‘be seen as evidence of aesthetic discernment, rather than as an indication of materialism’?

As is well known, it is not that the Bible is anti-materialist. God creates a good world for his human creatures to enjoy and in which they can flourish. Resurrection is for *bodies*! And, as Hugh Williamson’s article on the ‘material world’ describes, these material goods are intended for the whole community, even if there are poor and rich in this fallen world.¹²

In any case, Campbell’s blurring of aesthetic/materialistic lines doesn’t really grapple with the sharp edges of the ‘materialism’ criticism. Skye Jethani reports the case of the Steve Terrett, a 17-year-old Chicago youth who in March 2005 was shot in the back and his Nike Air Jordan ‘Solidify’ trainers stolen—a gift from his mother a month earlier. He died later that night in hospital.¹³ For Jethani this is a telling example of the destructive side of branding, of the consumer market fostering the desire

occurrence of the saying cited by C.C. Doyle, W. Mieder, and F.R. Shapiro (eds), *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 262, comes from the *New York Times*, 9 May 1983.

¹² H.G.M. Williamson, ‘The Old Testament and the Material World’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 47 (1985), 5–22.

¹³ Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), pp. 47–8. Details in the *Chicago Sun-Times* report, ‘Police: Teen admits boy was killed for new Air Jordans’, 4 April 2005 (<<https://goo.gl/BZT9Er>>, last accessed 03 April 2016). Two teens were charged with the murder, a 19-year-old and a 15-year-old, with the younger boy identified as the one who pulled the trigger.

for style over substance. While his appeal to some biblical examples of 'branding' strike me as misplaced, the discussion helpfully suggests that this destructive distortion participates in the materialist dynamic that Campbell associates positively with aestheticism.

One of the striking places in the OT where these factors come together is in the aesthetics of tabernacle and temple construction. Reading the double account (itself a curious textual fact) of the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus, or of the temple in 1 Kings 5–7, one is struck by the richness of fabric, the detailed and even extravagant fittings, and the nature of the skill required for their manufacture. Notably, in the Exodus account, we read for the first time of being 'filled with the Spirit of God' in Exodus 31:3, as Bezalel is gifted for this work, along with Oholiab (Exod. 31:1–11; cf. 35:30–36:5, where the Spirit's 'filling' is not only for design and manufacture, but for 'teaching' others to perform these tasks as well, 35:34). Some observations here: the first is way in which 'materiality' is affirmed, the repeated catalogues of precious metals, fabrics, skins, and other elements required for construction contributing an almost tactile sense to the account. Second, the fine crafting and skill required are depicted as enabled by divine endowment, and passed on to others by the same means. Third, one notes the way in which magnificence of manufacture calls forth a responsive munificence on the part of the people in Exodus, and later David (1 Chronicles 22) and the people (1 Chr. 29:6–9) gifting the materials required. On the one hand, this project materially impoverishes the community, while on the other it transposes these goods into a new key and for a higher purpose, thus re-enriching the giving community. This leads finally, and most clearly, to the consequent observation: these projects have a divine origin and goal, and provide a new meeting place between God and community.¹⁴

Such concerns lurk behind the construction of many places of worship in times since, the medieval cathedrals being obvious examples. It comes in a transferred sense into the rationale for state-of-the-art sound and projection systems that are required kit in modern Western places of Christian worship. Before we leave this topic, then, it is well to note briefly cautionary tales that seem to arise from this same impulse. (1) Embedded into the account of the temple construction is Solomon's

¹⁴ There is the matter, noted by Williamson in dialogue with Norman Gottwald, that the temple economy and the priests who operated it, could amass considerable wealth and occupy positions of privilege and power (the stories of Eli's and Samuel's sons giving evidence for the latter without the narrative setting of the former). My observations here have to do with craft and manufacture rather than the subsequent temple economy.

palatial building activities (1 Kgs. 7:1–11), in which the narrator quietly but acutely observes that its time to completion almost doubled that of the temple (cf. 1 Kgs. 6:38 and 7:1, these being contiguous verses), equalled its quality of manufacture (7:11), and further that Solomon provided likewise for an Egyptian princess, now his wife (7:8). It is possible to discern in these observations an implicit critique of the slippage between the work devoted to God, and that devoted to Solomon's own aggrandizement (cf. also Haggai 1:7–11). (2) The account of Ahaz's reign in 2 Kings 16 (// 2 Chr. 28:22–27) portrays a man of religious zeal, but one whose zeal is distinctly distorted. In his practice and in his provision for the temple, his inclinations were perverted by attention to the manner and manufacture of the surrounding nations. Again, the narrator refrains from explicit comment, but these actions and provisions mark another point in the decline which Hezekiah's reforms later addressed. (3) Much of a piece with this, but leading to deeper fall and ultimately the demise of the Southern kingdom (according to the narrator), is Manasseh's hyper-religiosity in 2 Kings 21, in which altars to Baal and the erection of an Asherah in the temple itself featured as elements of his religious innovation. (In 2 Chronicles 33 this activity is extended to include elements of Assyrian cult, and proscribed, occultish personnel.) This now does elicit cries of denunciation, and drives away the LORD for whom that temple had originally been built for the comfort of his people.

Again, there is a sense in Scripture of needing to be alert to how the orientations of our affections and material commitments coincide with what honours the true God, grows out of his desires, and deepens our communion, aesthetic considerations notwithstanding.

(3) Addiction

A third critique considered by Campbell is that consumerism fuels addictive behaviours. Consumers acquire an insatiable appetite for more stuff, needed (see #1, above!), or not. Here the telling cliché is to 'shop till you drop', or 'I shop therefore I am' in the words of one recent title.¹⁵ This might be considered an especially telling and trenchant criticism, since compulsive buying is a recognized pathological disorder. It can still be problematized, and Campbell does so. He observes that only a 'small minority' of consumers exhibit this kind of pathological addiction, the

¹⁵ Cited by Campbell: see April Lane Benson (ed.), *I Shop, Therefore I Am: Compulsive Buying and the Search for Self* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 2000); more recently, *To Buy or Not to Buy: Why We Overshop and How to Stop* (Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2008), and her website 'Stopping Overshopping' <<http://www.shopaholicnomore.com>> which offers help to 'shopaholics'.

implication (not stated) being that consumerism does not inevitably give rise to shopaholism (or 'oniomania').

Again, however, Campbell shifts our perceptions in consideration of this critique. What lies at the root of the criticism is the focus on the act of consuming itself, rather than the thing consumed: the compulsion to buy, rather than considering the thing bought. This process involves a certain novelty factor. As the novelty wears off, the urge to shop builds, and another purchase is (or further purchases are!) made. Campbell likens this to the consumption of 'mediated experiences': 'music, books, plays and films' (p. 289). You read a book, listen to an album, watch a film ... and then go and get more to read, hear, or see. This is not seen as distorted: it is the nature of 'consumption' to want *more*, and to want *new* (the 'novelty' factor noted by Campbell). He asks: on what basis is this behaviour, seen as normal and acceptable, different from seeking novelty in commodities purchased (as opposed to 'mediated experiences')?

Once again we run into the problem of objective criteria by which to assess associated but differentiated behaviours. Is it actually the case that appetite for 'mediated experiences' (much like appetite for food) is of the same order as that for 'clothes, ... furnishings, or interior décor generally', as Campbell seems to argue (p. 290)? And the perception remains that there is, in fact, a recognized disorder associated with shopping. Addiction to gambling or alcohol, or distortions in sexual matters may affect a relatively small proportion of the population, but awareness of such aberration serves as an alert to potential dangers. And the dangers, having been spotted, deserve warning signs to prevent disasters. It might be odd to think of biblical law in these terms, but it offers one context for considering appropriate warnings. Biblical law describes a rightly ordered community, and sets boundaries for its members within which they can flourish. This would be true of all biblical law (and is reflected in the affirmations of the activities of the 'righteous' in Psalm 1), but it can be seen clearly *in nuce* in the Decalogue: from the prohibition against exalting the material and creaturely above the Creator (Exod. 20:4), to the Sabbath provision (Exod. 20:8–10), to the prohibition on theft (Exod. 20:15), and finally to the unusual prohibition on coveting (Exod. 20:17; how can legislation like this be enforced?), the Decalogue describes a progression from divine to human, orienting human life toward the Creator, and away from unhealthy or destructive behaviours, in reality or in potential.

One brief scenario in the gospels may bring us face to face with something like 'addiction' to created goods, however. The story of the 'Rich Young Ruler' recounts the meeting between Jesus and the wealthy man

who asks Jesus, ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’¹⁶ The well-known exchange follows, in which Jesus provides a summary of laws from the Decalogue, and the man asserts his observance of them. Jesus replies, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ The reaction: ‘Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions’ (Mark 10:21–22). Preachers on this passage are wont to point out that it is only this man to whom Jesus gives this instruction. Jesus’ other interlocutors likewise receive individuated instructions (‘let the dead bury the dead’, etc.). There is an unwillingness in contemporary interpretation to generalize from this exchange. However, it is striking that the evangelists present Jesus himself as doing precisely this, extrapolating from the specific encounter in his teaching on the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom, accompanied by the eye-of-needle-camel figure of speech. The disciples feel its claim and its pinch: they apply the challenge to the ‘man’ also to themselves, or to any who belong to the wealthy pious. There are further details in the synoptic accounts which repay further investigation:¹⁷ Mark’s inclusion in Jesus’ list of commandments of the ‘non-commandment’, ‘do not defraud’ (Mark 10:19, and oppression of workers?), or Luke’s close joining of this episode with that of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10) who exhibits precisely the opposite response from that of the nameless ‘ruler’.

While set in a very different cultural environment from that of modern, Western shopaholics-in-the-making, such considerations nonetheless challenge the notion that ‘addiction’ (the compulsion to purchase) can be simply set aside.

(4) *Selfishness*

Each of the critiques assessed by Campbell so far could be said to involve ‘selfishness’ in some implicit sense, but this is now considered explicitly in the fourth ‘common criticism’ levelled against consumerism. Campbell could reference the words of ‘the former pope’ (citing *The Guard-*

¹⁶ Matt. 19:16–29 // Mark 10:17–22 // Luke 18:18–30. Matthew 19:20 calls him a *neaniskos*, while Luke 18:18 designates him an *archōn*.

¹⁷ See *inter alia*, Richard Hicks, ‘Markan Discipleship according to Malachi: The Significance of μη ἀποστερήσης in the Story of the Rich Man (Mark 10:17–22)’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 (2013), 179–99; Michael Peppard, ‘Torah for the Man Who Has Everything: “Do Not Defraud” in Mark 10:19’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134 (2015), 595–604. Both articles grapple in different ways with the nature of Jesus’ use of the Decalogue in the encounter.

ian, 16 December 1998) John Paul II, from a text which merits fuller quotation:¹⁸

The history of our time has shown in a tragic way the danger which results from forgetting the truth about the human person. Before our eyes we have the results of ideologies such as Marxism, Nazism and Fascism, and also of myths like racial superiority, nationalism and ethnic exclusivism. No less pernicious, though not always as obvious, are the effects of materialistic consumerism, in which the exaltation of the individual and the **selfish satisfaction of personal aspirations** become the ultimate goal of life. In this outlook, the negative effects on others are considered completely irrelevant.

To this could now be added the message of Pope Francis in his message of Sunday, 4 August 2013, at St Peter's Square, in the context of reflecting his recent experience of 'World Youth Day':¹⁹

Young people are particularly sensitive to the empty, meaningless values that often surround them. Unfortunately, moreover, it is they who pay the consequences. Instead the encounter with the living Christ in his great family which is the Church fills hearts with joy, for it fills them with true life, with a profound goodness that endures, that does not tarnish. ... But this experience must **confront the daily vanity, that poison of emptiness which creeps into our society based on profit and possession and on consumerism** which deceives young people. This Sunday's Gospel reminds us, precisely, of the absurdity of basing our own happiness on having. ... (cf. Lk. 12:19–20).

Campbell pushes back at this connection, arguing that 'it is not the case that most, let alone all, of modern consumer activity is undertaken in the interests of the self' (p. 290). Citing sociological studies, he points to the economy of the home, which expresses domestic concern rather than selfishness. Beyond this, he claims, neither can the 'vast orgy of spending' (p. 291) around Christmas each year be thought of as 'selfish', since 'virtually all of this' will be given away as gifts.

Even Campbell recognizes the limitations of this line of reasoning, however. Gift-giving is a complex matter, and can as easily be self-interested as other-directed. Moreover, this critique has something of the character of accusing the Pope of being Catholic: by definition, Campbell notes, consumption is self-directed. What else could it be? He considers,

¹⁸ <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_14121998_xxxii-world-day-for-peace.html>, accessed 2 April 2016; words in bold (added) are those quoted by Campbell.

¹⁹ <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20130804.html>; emphasis added.

then, that the deeper concern must be that 'modern consumer behaviour' has 'come to displace other forms of personal conduct and social interaction' (pp. 291–2). Here, however, a slightly unexpected shift takes place from the domestic context to the political, apparently shifting 'responsibility for this development' from consumers to politicians.

One 'response' to this line of reasoning is to consider passages which speak to rightly ordered desires, whether in the Old Testament or the New. For example, Psalm 73:25–26 comes at the culmination of a reflection on material prosperity and places the benefit of divine presence before any material or temporal good, so v. 25: 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.' This finds counterparts in the NT, e.g., Paul's declaration in Philippians 3:7–11 (v. 8a: 'Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord'). Christian self-awareness does not lead to self-centredness, nor directly to self-satisfaction. Rather, as in the papal pronouncements quoted above (or even the Piperian dictum, 'God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him'), in a rightly ordered life (that is, in the Christian life), the primary desire born of love is directed not to self, but to God. This does not imply or require ascetic self-abnegation for, as Oliver O'Donovan observes:²⁰

Loving God 'above all things' ... leads back to loving created goods, but it does so in a specific way and in a specific order and under specific controls. ... Love of God is affirmed in and through our other loves, structuring them and ordering them, so that with each new discovery of good that world and time lay open to us, the question of the love of God is put again, its sovereignty over other loves reasserted or forgotten.

(5) *Happiness*

Campbell's final 'critique' does not sound like one at first blush: it is 'happiness'. What is in mind here is something like a reprise of the 'most toys wins' scenario, *viz.*, that accumulation of goods is the 'path to true happiness' (p. 292). Campbell considers the literature exploring the correlation between wealth, acquisition, and happiness. It is a complex picture. On the one hand, it challenges the notion that continuing to increase one's goods brings increasing happiness, once a certain basic threshold is crossed. But, on the other, there is evidence to demonstrate that 'within any one society ... the rich are happier than the poor' (p. 293). 'Happiness' itself is a problematic concept here, which has only vague reference

²⁰ Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time. Ethics as Theology 1: An Induction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 119.

to general well-being. One might better speak in some settings of ‘pleasure’ or ‘excitement’ and these take their place, in Campbell’s discussion, among legitimate or ‘significant life-goals’ which, he claims, ‘can indeed be bought’. Well—perhaps some can!

We have noted above the way that biblical law comes to bear on these dynamics. Another obvious way in which this is case and which speaks to this ‘critique’ in particular is the nature of ownership of land, and thus of the means to live for a community of subsistence farmers. Williamson’s article on the ‘material world’ (see n. 12, above) sets out the structural elements regulating the ordered life of ancient Israel to ensure that wealth was not simply isolated in the hands of few, but that it would be used to ensure viability for the poor. There is no doubt that the Bible sees—in some cases, under certain conditions—the presence of wealth as ‘blessing’. That is not the end of it, however: there is also ‘ill-gotten’ gain. Biblical law again makes a contribution to our reflections: there is for example the famous ‘jubilee year’ of Leviticus 25:8–22, in which land redistribution prevents both unbridled accumulation, and perpetual displacement from ancestral lands. The rationale offered in Leviticus 25:23—at the ‘seam’ between the law of jubilee and property redemption—is significant: ‘The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, *for the land is mine*, for you are strangers and sojourners with me’ (emphasis added). This relativizes ownership in a quite dramatic way. A similar notion is found also in Psalm 50:10–12, where the value God places on sacrifice is qualified: ‘If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine’ (v. 12).

These are not isolated examples. This sense is reflected, too, in the exodus provision of manna, in which consumption was always sufficient, and accumulation and stock-piling impossible (Exod. 16:18). Or, in the NT, one thinks of the futility of building ‘bigger barns’ in Jesus’ teaching on the ‘rich fool’ in Luke 12:13–21. Not only does Jesus’ assert that the attempt to find happiness in the accumulation of wealth is futile (much, perhaps, as Qoheleth might have done), but it comes at a prompt from brothers quarrelling over the division of their inheritance. The teaching, with a warning, followed. Here the ‘happiness’ of the wealthy is an elusive and even chimerical goal—accumulation is not being recommended as a route to achieving it.

A much larger consideration is that, as I heard in a sermon recently, the Christian’s primary goal is not happiness, but holiness. Campbell’s argument inclines towards seeing life as a ‘bucket list’:²¹ I can buy things

²¹ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first occurrence of this phrase came with the announcement of the 2007 Rob Reiner film, ‘The Bucket List’.

off my ultimate wish list. Even if this isn't precisely 'happiness', the claim is that it's the next best thing. If this is consumerism, it's a long way—diametrically opposed—to a biblical vision of a fulfilled life.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

It has not been my purpose in the preceding discussion to test the strength of Campbell's arguments, or to adjudicate their soundness or success. Rather, I see Campbell addressing consumerism's vulnerable points, making the case that there is a baby in the bathwater, and that it shouldn't disappear down the drain through mere carelessness or cheap critique. None of these, however, was found to tally with a 'biblical perspective'. In each case, the Bible and consumerism point in different directions.

Admittedly, my taking Campbell's five common critiques as a starting point for this engagement has limitations, and so this essay should be seen simply as a first step: I have not found room above to consider, e.g., the assumption of Christian suffering which sits at best uneasily in a consumerist setting.²² More likely, it should rather be seen as something wholly alien to it.

Still, Campbell's counter to common critiques of consumerism highlights deep-seated problems with consumerism inviting an engagement with 'biblical perspectives'. Taken more broadly, two fundamental concerns issue from my preliminary biblical grappling with Campbell's article: consumerism relativizes authority; and consumerism wrongly centres the meaning of life.

In the first case, Campbell's arguments locate the common critiques in basic prejudice: competing values have no external point of arbitration or reference, but reside in the preferences of the individual—thus the claims for the possibility of 'neo-Puritanism'. Such does not reflect a gospel-shaped life. It is not simply a matter of eliciting prescriptions (though prescriptions there are). Scripture (the whole of it) informs our thinking about how we respond to the world of goods: 'Obedience is a matter of

citing the UPI Newswire for 29 June 2006. It seems to have entered circulation very quickly: even if the film was critically panned, the title caught the public's imagination.

²² Cf. e.g. Mark 8:34–37; John 15:18–20; James 1:2–4; 1 Peter 4:12–13; and Carl Trueman's brief but pointed remarks on this theme: '*Simul peccator et justus*: Martin Luther and Justification', in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. by Bruce L. McCormack (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: Rutherford House/Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 73–97 (see esp. pp. 96–7).

how our own confession is to harmonize with the testimony of Scripture', and this as 'an exercise of faith'.²³

In the second case, consumerist inclinations are situated within and/or aligned with otherwise laudable (or at any rate acceptable) appetites and desires. Reading Campbell's article might elicit the response: 'Nothing to see here, keep moving!'. But that is not the whole story. Campbell's arguments rest on the assumption that self-realization and self-satisfaction represent default and even worthy aspirations. This is alien to a Christian perspective. While the attitude espoused by Paul in Philippians 3:7–11 may be only latent in the OT, the trajectory is already set there, not least in the words of the psalmists as, e.g., in Psalm 73:25 (both noted above), or the attitude which pervades Psalm 19, which in turn finds a distinct counterpoint in Psalm 119:36–37 (cf. v. 127):

36 Incline my heart to your testimonies,
and not to selfish gain!
37 Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;
and give me life in your ways.

²³ O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, pp. 79–80. Compare also, O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking. Ethics as Theology 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), pp. 132–6 on 'receiving the testimony'.