The Gospel and the Marketplace
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Thank you to the Society for the invitation to deliver the 2016 Finlayson Memorial Lecture. It is a great honour to do so, though I have to confess to accepting the invitation less in my own capacity and more on behalf of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.

LICC was founded in 1982 by John Stott, who had for many years been Rector at All Souls Langham Place in London. Stott was well known for his call to 'double listening' – to the *word* and to the *world*, in order to relate the one to the other.[2] He founded LICC as an organisation to help Christians engage biblically with the issues they faced in their everyday life. In the ongoing work of LICC, that concern has been folded into a fuller vision of being disciples of Jesus in the everyday arenas in which we find ourselves, on our 'frontlines' – the places where we spend most of our time, whether at work or in the home, or out and about in the local community. What does it mean to be equipped as missionary followers of Jesus in those ordinary, everyday places?

It is with those concerns in mind that we approach the topic before us. Not merely in a way that will engage our minds, but in a way that will inspire the hearts of all who own the name of Christ and who, in line with the concern of the Scottish Evangelical Theological Society, want to see God's mission expand in Scotland and beyond.

We here explore the topic of 'the gospel and the marketplace' in three movements. First, by considering what is understood by the 'Marketplace', looking particularly at some of the many facets of consumerist culture in society at large and in the church. Then, secondly, we reflect briefly on the 'Gospel', the good news that God has acted in Jesus to bring salvation to us and to the world. Then, thirdly, we highlight some implications of

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1 Delivered on 4 April 2016 at St Silas Church, Glasgow, as part of the annual conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society, the topic for which was: 'A Gospel for Sale? Is God a Commodity?' This version has been lightly revised for publication, but still largely retains the informal nature of its original presentation.

2 This is laid out in John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (Leicester: IVP, 1992).

the gospel for our reflections on, and our engagement with, the culture of the marketplace.

THE MARKETPLACE

In some contexts, 'marketplace' is used as a more-or-less equivalent term for 'workplace'.[3] More strictly, 'marketplace' has to do with the arena of commercial dealings, the world of trade. What follows, however, is not a treatment of economics or the virtues of different economic systems – socialism, capitalism, or something else – although there are debates to be had here. Instead, in view is how the 'marketplace' functions as a cultural driver in society today. This is to recognise that there are various drivers at work in contemporary culture, forces which shape the waves we encounter in our daily lives, and which shape us in the process. The 'marketplace' is just one of those drivers, albeit a significant one.

Susan White wrote some years ago:

> If there is any overarching metanarrative that purports to explain reality in the late 20th century, it is surely the narrative of the free-market economy. In the beginning of this narrative is the self-made, self-sufficient human being. At the end of this narrative is the big house, the big car, and the expensive clothes. In the middle is the struggle for success, the greed, the getting-and-spending in a world where there is no such thing as a free lunch. Most of us have made this so thoroughly "our story" that we are hardly aware of its influence.[4]

The marketplace is a way of explaining life. In order to approach the topic of 'The Gospel and the Marketplace' we must observe outcomes of commodification and consumerism, first upon the general public and second with respect to Christian faith and practice. We will then be in a position to consider the implications of the gospel upon a market culture.

1. Commodification and consumerism in general

Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (London: Black Swan, 2000) was the first in a series of novels, following Rebecca Bloomwood through her adventures in shopping and life.[5] The movie of the book was released

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3 For example: Pete Hammond, R. Paul Stevens, and Todd Svanoe, *The Marketplace Annotated Bibliography: A Christian Guide to Books on Work, Business and Vocation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002).

4 Susan J. White, 'A New Story to Live By?', *Transmission* (Spring 1998), pp. 3-4.

5 'Confessions of a Shopaholic'. Directed by P. J. Hogan. Touchstone Pictures, 2009.

in 2009. It begins with Becky out on a shopping spree, who sums up her life in these words: 'Rebecca Bloomwood. Occupation: journalist. Jacket: Visa. Dress: AmEx. Belt: Mastercard. It's minted, and I get 1 percent cash back. Bag: Gucci – and it's worth every penny.'

As it happens, we don't need to do much serious research to see evidence of consumerism all around us in everyday life. Imagine we visit a typical High Street in a typical town. The first thing we want to do is get something to eat, so we head to Burger King, and come across this:

> Have it your way. You have the right to have what you want, exactly when you want it. Because on the menu of life, you are 'Today's Special'. And tomorrow's. And the day after that. And... well, you get the drift. Yes, that's right. We may be the King, but you my friend, are the almighty ruler.

Then we pop into Uniqlo, and are greeted with this:

> Uniqlo. Made for all. It doesn't matter who you are or where you live, Uniqlo makes clothes that transcend all categories and social groups. Our clothes are made for all, going beyond age, gender, occupation, ethnicity and all the other ways that define people. Our clothes are simple and essential yet universal, so people can freely combine them with their own unique styles, in any way they choose, every day of the year.

Then, after we've done all we came to do and probably much more, we head home on the train, worn out, and we look up and see an advert for easyJet:

> The I can't wait to go generation.
> The early risers for the airport cab, last minute packing, full of excitement generation.
> The head first into water, wine or work generation.
> The nip over, seal the deal, back for story time generation.
> The walk until you're lost, find a quaint spot, strangers become friends generation.
> The we've been coming here for years, but still fall in love generation.
> The I don't want to go home, let's stay longer generation.
> The back at the office, staring out the window, let's do it again generation.
> The everyone doing it their way generation.
> The more places, more choices, more often generation.
> This is generation easyJet.

Examples could be multiplied many times over. We are living in a culture where we are increasingly defined by what we consume – whether shop-

ping, eating, watching sport, receiving healthcare, or where we send our children to school.

As Lily Allen sings:

> And I am a weapon of mass consumption
> And it's not my fault, it's how I'm programmed to function.[6]

Nor does it take too much to see in such examples a certain view of human beings – an *anthropology*; a certain view of salvation – a *soteriology*; a certain view of community – an *ecclesiology*; a certain view of hope – an *eschatology*. It doesn't take much, in other words, to see consumerism as an overarching view of the world and of life which affects the thinking and values in society more broadly – and which goes far beyond the goods we buy. As Dave Landrum of the Evangelical Alliance UK says:

> There's marriage. Once seen as the building block of society, but now effectively privatised, consigned to be redefined evermore by the free-market of relationships. There's sexuality. Despite biological identity being fixed in nature, it's now being subjected to consumer choice by 'gender fluidity'. And then there's life itself. With abortion, the consumer fixation with 'pro-choice' has created an entire industry, and alongside sex-selective abortions, another bio-engineering industry is developing to supply 'designer babies' to suit our lifestyle choices.[7]

Consumerism thus affects more than shopping habits. It is a deeply ingrained way of seeing the world, where everything can be commodified.

What we see in everyday life is borne out – beyond novels by Sophie Kinsella and songs by Lily Allen! – in research on consumerism. Space permits us to highlight only a few points about the nature of consumerism that flow out of those who have worked in this area.[8]

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6 Lily Allen, 'The Fear' (2009).

7 David Landrum, 'Consuming Passions', *Idea* (March/April 2016), p. 12.

8 For fuller treatments, see: *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*, ed. by Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000); William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Mark Clavier, *Rescuing the Church from Consumerism* (London: SPCK, 2013); Laura M. Hartman, *The Christian Consumer: Living Faithfully in a Fragile World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006. 2nd edn.); Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003); Bruce P. Rittenhouse, *Shop-*

Firstly, *consumerism exalts choice*. We benefit from the variety and freedom of choice in today's western culture. Nor is it necessarily wrong to own things. Unless, of course, they start to own us! Then, with the logic of 'I shop, therefore I am', we buy things we don't really need with money we don't really have. As William Cavanaugh notes, 'consumerism is not so much about having more as it is about having something else; that's why it is not simply *buying* but *shopping* that is the heart of consumerism'.[9]

Secondly, *consumerism entails detachment*. Consumerism detaches us from people and from the natural world. In the west, we have moved from a place where the average family has changed from one of production to one of consumption. We no longer chop wood. We turn up the thermostat. With some exceptions, we no longer grow our own vegetables and fruit, or keep and kill our own chickens and pigs. We have become separated from the realities of production. There are children in some urban settings who don't know where milk comes from. We have very little consciousness of how long it takes for things to grow. We take it for granted that flowers and bananas are available all year round. All this shapes how we think about ourselves and the world.

In that sense, we are detached from *production* and the *producers*. We are detached in another sense from the *products* themselves. We sometimes think consumerism is about greed and holding on to things. In reality, it's more about *detachment* from things, moving on to the next new thing.

Cavanaugh helpfully points out some affinities with the Christian faith at this point. Christians also believe that created things, though good, are never ends in themselves, and so they will always fail fully to satisfy. The difference, according to Cavanaugh, is that in consumerism, detachment continually moves us from one product to another, whereas in Christianity it leads – or ought to do so – to a greater attachment to God and to others.[10]

Thirdly, *consumerism promises freedom*. Free market freedom is defined as the absence of limitations on the individual pursuit of desires. But the freedom promised by consumerism doesn't deliver. It's a flawed view, because it defines freedom negatively, as an absolute freedom from any external constraints. For Christians, true freedom does not involve living for ourselves, but living under the lordship of Jesus. Paradoxically, belonging to Christ marks not the end of slavery but the beginning of a

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ping for Meaningful Lives: The Religious Motive of Consumerism (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013).

9 Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, p. 35, his italics.

10 Ibid., pp. 33-58.

new type of slavery. We're set free from one master into the service of another, to be 'slaves to righteousness' and 'slaves of God' (Romans 6:18-19, 22).

Related to this, fourthly, *consumerism generates dissatisfaction*. The tendency with consumerism is to create dissatisfaction with what we have, where wanting takes precedence over having, creating a 'consumer cycle'. There is a *desire*, which leads to the *acquisition* of a good, then *use* of that good, which, however, leads to *disillusionment*, because it doesn't measure up to its promise, or an upgraded model comes out, or something else takes its place, which then leads to a *renewed desire*, and the process repeats. Small wonder a marketing manager of General Motors referred to his task as the 'organised creation of dissatisfaction'.

In 2005, the street artist Banksy produced a stencil work depicting Jesus Christ crucified, with outstretched arms holding shopping bags. In the shopping bags one can see wrapped presents, a candy cane, and part of a Mickey Mouse doll, emphasising how the Christmas season, which is supposed to celebrate the birth of Jesus, has come to represent consumerism. The crucifixion may stand for how people sacrifice themselves for material things. But the objects themselves are melting, showing that they do not bring satisfaction.

Fifthly, *consumerism shapes desires*. James K.A. Smith invites us to be cultural anthropologists from Mars who are studying the religious behaviour of human beings, taking in a number of sites of religious practice. One particular temple we visit, surrounded by a moat of coloured asphalt, is attended by thousands of pilgrims every day. Making our way through it is akin to wandering through an ancient labyrinth. Various chapels of devotion lined up on each side, their windows displaying 3D icons of what the 'good life' looks like, invite us to explore further. Others, too, are looking, on a quest to find something. Finally, when we do find what we think will bring us happiness, we take it up to the priest at the altar to perform an act of transaction. The priest consummates the action, sending us out with a benediction – 'have a great day, see you again'.[11]

Smith is not the only one to use this illustration, but the shopping centre, or mall (in case it was not obvious in the above description!), is a particularly potent representative of the marketplace – an intensification

[11] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), pp. 89-103, and *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), pp. 38-53.

of a wider set of practices associated with consumerism.[12] The rhythms, rituals, and spaces of the shopping centre add up to what Smith calls a 'cultural liturgy', which is loaded with a particular vision of what constitutes the 'good life'. What vision does it embody? What kind of people does it want us to become? Visit it regularly enough, says Smith, and we will be shaped. We might not notice the shaping, but we are being trained, 'discipled' no less, to view life in a certain way. We are absorbing powerful 'sermons' about the way our life *could be* if we'd only adopt this lifestyle, or give this product a try.

Crucially, in Smith's account, the shopping centre does not engage our *minds* first and foremost. Smith suggests that behind much of our pedagogy as Christians and in our churches is a view of human beings as primarily 'thinking things'. Discipleship gets reduced to the issue of right *thinking*. If we could only instil the right sort of *knowledge* and get people to *understand*, we think, everything would be okay. But this is where the marketplace culture perhaps understands human beings better than churches do – because it understands that we're fundamentally oriented by desire. It forms our identity by shaping what we *love*, what we *desire*. It's after our *hearts*. What we have done, according to Smith, is concede the formation of desire to the marketplace – in a way that subtly but powerfully shapes our view of the gospel, its purpose, and our role in God's mission.

Of course, we are all consumers. We purchase products or services to use in order to meet our needs and fulfil our desires – every time we buy groceries, fill our car with petrol, or go to the cinema to watch a film. From a Christian perspective, God has created us with the capacity to enjoy consumption. At a most basic level, we *have* to consume things in order to live, and there is nothing wrong with tangible goods per se. Christians are not anti-materialists, nor do we want to retreat into pietism or dualism.[13] But when our decisions about consuming move to a search

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12 See also Jon Pahl, *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces: Putting God in Place* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), and Ira G. Zepp, Jr, *The New Religious Image of Urban America: The Shopping Mall as Ceremonial Center* (Mesoamerican Worlds; Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1997. 2nd edn).

13 See Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015) for an argument that we don't have to choose between our love for God and our enjoyment of his gifts. Ruth Valerio, *Just Living: Faith and Community in an Age of Consumerism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016) also seeks to navigate between therapeutic narcissism and world-denying asceticism to a way of life which appreciates what it means to use pleasurable things rightly and for good ends, bound up with justice and the welfare of others.

for identity, meaning, purpose and belonging, then a 'good' thing has become an 'ultimate' thing. It's the perpetual cycle of desire and dissatisfaction along with the quest to turn everything and everyone – including God and his word and the church and the gospel – into a commodity that is the problem.

2. Commodification and consumerism in Christianity

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that several commentators see the cultural driver of the marketplace at work in Christianity.[14] Like it or not, the Christian faith is frequently understood and practised through the lens of consumer culture, rather than the reverse. Virtually everything has become, or can become, a commodity to be consumed according to how useful it is in my journey of self-fulfilment. As Skye Jethani points out, 'more than merely an economic system', consumerism is 'the framework through which we understand everything including the gospel, the church, and God himself'.[15]

How far do we 'buy into' God to the extent that it suits us to do so, take what we want from him, and shop elsewhere for the rest? How far do we approach our faith in terms of what we get out of it? How far do we think of Jesus as virtually indistinguishable from any other brand or consumer choice? How far do we shop around the Bible itself for what we'd like to hear? How far are our church services about creating products that will appeal to consumers? How far do we use the church rather than belong to it, picking and choosing our levels and limits of involvement? How far in church leadership have we adopted business principles and practices virtually wholesale, without pause, from the secular world?

Jethani pointedly asks: 'Has the contemporary church been so captivated by the images and methods of the consumer culture that it has forfeited its sacred vocation to be a countercultural agent of God's kingdom in the world? And if it has, what are we to do about it?' But, as he goes on to note, 'there is a difference between living in a consumer society and adopting a consumer worldview'.[16] The question is not whether we will consume, but *how* we consume rightly, how God – through the gospel – forms us to consume faithfully.

But what is this gospel?

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[14] For example: Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Tyler Wigg Stevenson, *Brand Jesus: Christianity in a Consumerist Age* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

[15] Jethani, *Divine Commodity*, p. 12.

[16] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

THE GOSPEL

Many religions begin by telling men and women what *they* should do; Christianity begins with what *God* has done. That, right there, is shorthand for the 'gospel', referring not to a set of good instructions or a piece of good advice, but to the *good news* of what God himself has achieved – for us and for the world – in Christ.[17]

In the Roman Empire of the first century, heralds would spread the 'good news' of military victories or an emperor's coming to the throne. But for Christians, the word 'gospel' also came loaded with Old Testament promises of salvation. Isaiah, in particular, declares the 'good tidings' of God coming in power, exercising his reign, saving his people, and establishing peace (e.g. Isaiah 40:9-11; 52:7; 61:1-2). Indeed, the closing chapters of his prophecy describe how God's reign will be universal in its scope, embracing all nations, even renewing the whole cosmos.

It is in this light that Mark 1:14-15 describes Jesus preaching the 'good news' of the arrival of God's reign – as the culmination of a story which reaches back into God's dealings with his people. But as the account moves on, as Jesus walks the path to death and resurrection, it becomes clear that the promised salvation will come about through the servant promised by Isaiah who would suffer and die on behalf of others. Kingdom and cross are bound together in the gospel.[18]

It is often tempting to reduce the gospel to a personal transaction (shades of consumerism again?) between me and God in which Jesus dies for me, I repent, and God forgives my sin. Certainly, the gospel is not less than that. But it is much more, involving not only the *rescue* of men and women from judgment, but the *renewal* of God's relationship with his people, and the *restoration* of creation itself. The good news of what God has done in Jesus carries *zoom-lens* implications for the redemption of individual sinners and *wide-angle* implications for the reconciliation of all things.[19]

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[17] There has been an encouraging renaissance of interest in theological reflection on the gospel; for some representative treatments, see: Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009); Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); Tom Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good* (London: SPCK, 2015).

[18] So, helpfully, Tim Chester, *Crown of Thorns: Connecting Kingdom and Cross* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2015).

[19] This 'zoom' and 'wide-angle' lens analogy is borrowed from Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of*

The gospel announces that, supremely through the death and resurrection of Christ, God is restoring men and women to himself, forgiving their sin, reconciling the alienated, redeeming the enslaved. The gospel says that God is restoring humans, giving them new life and beginning the work of recreating them in the image of Christ, remaking a new humanity in the body of Christ. The gospel declares that God has set in motion the restoration of the world itself, the reconciliation of all things in heaven and on earth, so that nothing will be left untouched by its expansive scope. On this understanding, a commitment to the gospel is significant for the whole of life. At home and at work, in the art gallery and the sports arena, in business and in politics, walking the dog and washing the dishes, there is no place the gospel does not touch with its implications because of the comprehensive nature of God's saving work in Christ, his rule over *every* aspect of life.

With this in mind, we come to our third and final section, looking at some of the implications of the gospel for a marketplace culture.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE GOSPEL IN A MARKETPLACE CULTURE

As Christians, we are not left waiting for heaven 'there and then' with no implications for life 'here and now'. There is a new way to be human, a new way to live in community, a new way to relate to the world around us, and we are called, as disciples of Jesus, to live as part of this new order. The gospel brings an alternative vision of life which engages the cultural narratives on offer in the world today, including the marketplace narrative, sometimes affirming it, sometimes critiquing it, sometimes subverting it. Of all that could be said here, we highlight five implications.

1. Gospel salvation in an age of consumerism

First of all, it's *salvation which is freely available*. It cannot be bought. We cannot buy it because our sin renders us spiritually bankrupt before God. Yet it's available to us at no charge. That might be foolishness to consumers, to those who have imbibed the philosophy of the marketplace, in the same way that the cross was foolishness to the Greeks and Jews of Paul's day for various reasons.

The cross subverts human expectations about the way power operates, about the way things get done, about the nature of true wisdom. As the apostle Paul wrote, 'the message of the cross is foolishness to those who

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Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), pp. 91-113.

are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Corinthians 1:18). Yet the cross also brings what we truly long for. According to Paul, that which is most desired by Greeks and Jews – wisdom and power – is delivered in that which is most despised, in 'Christ crucified... the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

Likewise for the consumer, there may be some 'subversive fulfilment' going on here: the freedom that you're really looking for, which is being expressed in your consumer habits and lifestyle, is available through something you can't actually buy![20]

Secondly, it's *salvation that brings freedom*. As noted above in our reflections on consumerism, at large is a notion of freedom as freedom from all limits, from all constraints – which we see in our individualism, our suspicion of authority, and our consumerism. Freedom has become a supreme value in today's culture. But, as Tim Keller points out, freedom 'is not the absence of limitations and constraints but it is finding the right ones, those that fit our nature and liberate us'.[21]

Our society tends to see freedom as freedom *from* certain obligations. The biblical view is far richer. It's a freedom *of* – the freedom of realising what we were designed to be, the freedom of loving and being loved, the freedom of experiencing joy and peace. And it comes about through the work of Christ, who sets us free to be free indeed (John 8:36). It's also a freedom *for*. Understood in a Christian framework, freedom requires a *telos*, a goal. True freedom is *for* something – to become who we were created and then redeemed to be. Genuine freedom is *for* a life focused on love for God, for others, and for the world.

Many works on consumerism – by non-Christians as well as Christians – call us to counter-cultural practices: to live a simpler lifestyle; to be content with what we have; to practise Sabbath; to support smaller, local operations; to take back some parts of production; to buy local and organic; to scale down rather than scale up; to show hospitality to others, particularly the marginalised. All of which is significant. Still, we do these things as an *outflow* of the gospel, not in any way to earn salvation, but as a sign that we have been set free, as a mark that in Christ we are recovering our freedom to live in a way that pleases God and serves others.

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[20] For a full treatment of the concept of 'subversive fulfilment', see Daniel Strange, *'For Their Rock Is Not As Our Rock': An Evangelical Theology of Religions* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2014), pp. 237-302.

[21] Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008), p. 49.

2. Gospel community in an age of isolationism

David Fitch writes that 'it is our own modernism that has allowed us to individualize, commodify, and package Christianity so much that the evangelical church is often barely distinguishable from other goods and service providers, self-help groups, and social organizations'.[22] For Fitch and others, whatever helpful insights might emerge from such models, the church is not ultimately entertainment-driven, or management-driven, or therapy-driven, or culture-driven, or consumer-driven, but *God*-driven, *Christ*-driven, *Spirit*-driven, *word-of-God*-driven, *bread-and-wine*-driven – *gospel*-driven.

Being a *Christian* is bound up with belonging to the *church*. The church is not *incidental* to the gospel, but *integral* to the gospel. The gospel which saves us as *believers* in Christ is also the gospel which incorporates us into the *body* of Christ. We are individual *followers* of Jesus who enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus, but we belong to the corporate *fellowship* of others with whom we are also, necessarily, in relationship.

Once again, there is a form of 'subversive fulfilment' here. The ultimate longings of the marketplace culture are subversively fulfilled with the coming of God's new order. We want to belong, we want community. But that's often understood in a consumerist way – in a way that serves me, in a desire to belong with people like me, from whom I can benefit. But the gospel brings us into a community of different types of people, which is based on faith in Christ, and which calls us to love and serve one another. As a church leader friend once said, 'meaningful membership and participation in a local congregation is where we defy the consumer message that we are the centre'.

The church is what it is because of what God himself in Christ has done for it. And it is the gospel that defines the church's vocation, mission, and activities. It is the gospel that shapes the church when we are *gathered* together for set times of worship and sacrament and teaching, and it is the gospel that fashions the nature of our life and witness when we are *scattered* throughout the week. This leads to our third implication.

3. Gospel mission in an age of need

If we need a bigger view of the scope of the gospel, we might also need a bigger view of the church's mission than we have been used to. We need a bigger vision than simply 'how we run our church' – important though

[22] David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), pp. 13-14.

that is; we need to understand how the life and ministry of the local church fit into God's mission for the *whole world* to which he calls *all* his people.

There is now a huge volume of work here from a wide range of thinkers and practitioners – but it essentially involves moving mission to the very *centre* and *being* of the church rather than treating it as an add-on to the church's ministry. This being the case, mission is not something the church does; it is something that *God* does through the church, called, equipped and sent by God as a witness in his ongoing plan to restore the world. So, the church is not primarily 'a place where certain things happen', somewhere we go to. Nor is it, to use George Hunsberger's often-cited phrase, 'a vendor of religious services and goods'.[23] It is a body of people gathered in worship and then sent out on mission. We're not looking for religious 'customers'; we're looking to proclaim the gospel to the spiritually needy, the hungry and the thirsty, the lost.

Of course, we rightly gather as local churches on Sundays and at other times, for worship and teaching, to meet with others, to learn from God's word, to celebrate communion, in large and small groups. But the reality is, most of the week we aren't gathered *inside* a building. We're scattered *outside* the building, in different places – in our families, our homes, our streets, our neighbourhoods, at school or college, in jobs, in various activities in the local community, whether we're 6 or 96. In *all* of those places, we are witnesses to Jesus in a world that needs to hear the good news of God. And it's in those places that we might be able to model a different way of living, one that's not so beholden to the cultural mores of the marketplace.

Those of us in church leadership might want to reflect on how we nurture congregations of people who will live faithfully in the world, through preaching that equips, through the worship of the gathered church, in cultivating virtue, in summoning all of God's people to see the whole of their lives as a place for discipleship and service, and the whole of God's world as a mission field.[24]

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[23] See now George R. Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision* (The Gospel and Our Culture Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), p. 34.

[24] On which, see Neil Hudson, *Imagine Church: Releasing Whole-Life Disciples* (Nottingham: IVP, 2012).

4. Gospel vocation in an age of narcissism

It is increasingly recognised that consumerist culture makes the issue of vocation more problematic, particularly for young adults, those in transition from university to work, in their early 20s and then into their 30s.[25]

It is especially difficult in a culture that deifies choice. As parents, we arguably play into this if and when we tell our children that they can be anything they want to be when they grow up, that self-definition and self-expression is theirs for the choosing. Understandably, this can lead to a great deal of searching: could I? should I? what if I did? what if I didn't? what options would it open up? what options would it close down? In some cases, it's not enough to have a job, even a well-paid one. Work needs to fit well with my interests and abilities, be satisfying and enjoyable, be an expression of me, seeing God, as Os Guinness says, as the 'grand employment agency, a celestial executive searcher to find perfect fits for our perfect gifts'.[26]

Never mind that most people throughout history simply haven't had those options; never mind that many people throughout the world even *today* simply don't have the luxury of choice, for whom 'doing what you love' while 'helping to make the world a better place' just isn't a possibility.

Of course, there is much to say about the goodness of work, the significance of serving others, and of finding joy in what we do. But there is also an increasing worry that we have trained our young adults to be narcissistic and elitist. Instead, a view rooted in the gospel focuses on vocation as the *primary call* to follow Jesus and to live that out in the whole range of our secondary callings – including, but not limited to, work. Work is just one of the ways I respond, as a disciple of Christ, to his calling on me to follow *him*, to love God and love my neighbour, to bear fruit to the glory of God.

Vocation, then, goes hand in hand with stewardship, as we move beyond a consumer identity and see ourselves as stewards, where everything we have and everything we are ultimately belongs to God not to us. This brings us to our final implication.

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[25] I have been helped here by David P. Setran, '"Getting a Life:" Vocational Discernment in the Post-Christian World', *Christian Education Journal* 8, 2 (2011), pp. 345-63, and Scott Waalkes, 'Rethinking Work as Vocation: From Protestant Advice to Gospel Corrective', *Christian Scholar's Review* 44, 2 (2015), pp. 135-53.

[26] Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Word, 1998), p. 47.

5. Gospel worship in an age of idolatry

As already noted, our faith and discipleship involve more than just the transmission of knowledge, important though that is. Following Jesus involves the formation of our *desires*. It's what we *love* that truly shapes who we are.

The early church theologian Augustine recognised this. In his classic work, *Confessions*, Augustine explains that sin is 'disordered love' – love out of order.[27] Where we might think of sin primarily in terms of bad deeds, Augustine helps us see it from another perspective – of what we love. The problem comes when we love something we *should* love but which we should *not* love supremely. We love the *right* things in the *wrong* way. We make *good* things into *god* things – which is idolatry.

Related to this, Tim Keller helpfully reminds us of the distinction between *surface* idols and *deep* idols.[28] *Surface* idols are the car we have, or the spouse we'd like, or the hobby we spend a lot of time on, or the extra money we think will make all the difference. It could be keeping the lawn trimmed, or making sure the house is always clean, or getting promoted at work, or being complimented on having such well-behaved children. Many of these are good things, even right things. The problem is that we want them too much, or for the wrong reasons – because behind each *surface* idol is a *deep* idol, the *real* need we're trying to meet – security, significance, approval, comfort, control. And that's what we *really* worship, that's what we really love.

How do we enjoy a created thing without making it an idol? In a line from C.S. Lewis, we chase the sunbeam back up to the sun. We trace the good things we enjoy back to their source in God and his goodness. As James writes, 'Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows' (James 1:17).

Above all, then, we love God himself. The Bible talks about our love for God mostly in the sense of our obeying him, serving him, and honouring him – with our total being. When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, we read in Matthew 22:37-40: 'Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."'

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[27] See David K. Naugle, *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives: Learning the Deep Meaning of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 31-57.

[28] Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: When the Empty Promises of Love, Money and Power Let You Down* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009), pp. 64-66.

If we are what we love, then how does our love get shaped and formed for different ends? It takes *practice*, as James K.A. Smith points out.[29] What vision of the good life is implicit in the secular liturgies of the shopping centre, the sports stadium, and the university? How does Christian worship provide a *counter*-formation to those liturgies? A Christianised version of the shopping centre won't provide a powerful-enough countermeasure. We need worship practices that form us to be a people who love and serve God. Such formation comes about through confession of sin and seeking assurance of forgiveness whereby we acknowledge our brokenness and are set free. Baptism constitutes us as part of the people of God, reminding us that we are not on our own, but incorporated into a larger community. Bringing an offering of money tells a different story about the way money works. The preached word brings us face to face with Jesus and his saving power, and shapes us for life in the world. Eating bread and drinking wine, an act of consumption, is turned inside out as we are caught up in a story larger than our own. We are blessed and then sent out as a missional people to embody God's purposes in the world. All these formational practices, seen in many Christian traditions, are founded in God's word.

In all these different ways, then, what we have in the gospel and its implications responds to the cultural driver of the marketplace. Our longing for liberation, community, transcendence, belonging, and a story that's bigger than ourselves is found in the cross of Christ on our hearts and in our lives.

[29] Smith, *You Are What You Love*.