

4

kultcha-schmultcha

Human existence cannot derive its ultimate meaning from society because society itself is in need of meaning.

—Abraham Heschel

Because the Light is radically different from the Darkness, the manifestation of the Light always opposes the Darkness. . . . This is not to say that disciples should not agree with secular voices at certain points, but is merely to warn that simply seconding the wisdom of the world is not testimony to the Word of God.

—Gene Davenport

If everyone lives roughly the same lies about the same things, then there is no one to call them lies; they jointly establish their own sanity and call themselves normal.

—Ernest Becker

Reporting on Black Friday, an American phenomenon, the *Seattle Times* highlights a serious tragedy:

In a sign of consumer desperation amid a bleak economy, the annual rite of retailing known as Black Friday turned chaotic and deadly as shoppers scrambled for holiday bargains. A Wal-Mart worker on Long Island, New York, died after being trampled by customers who broke through the doors early Friday. Other workers were trampled as they tried to rescue the man. At least four other people, including a woman who was eight months pregnant, were taken to hospitals.

This was not an isolated incident; fights and injuries occurred elsewhere at other stores operated by Wal-Mart, America's leading discount chain. Meanwhile, two men at a crowded Toys "R" Us store in Palm Desert, California, pulled guns and shot each other to death after the women accompanying them brawled over bargains. When interviewed after the event, Joe Priester, former president of the Society for Consumer Psychology, commented, "I think it ties into a sort of fear and panic of not having enough."¹

Something profound is being signified in these events. They are a manifestation, a parable if you will, of some of the dangerous, subterranean energies that seem to pervade our culture.

Discipleship in Reverse

Identifying the spirits of our age while living in and—to varying degrees—being immersed in the prevailing culture is one of the trickiest things disciples have to negotiate. As missionaries following the traces of God, we must affirm that which is genuinely good and present in any and every human culture, for many aspects are indeed wholesome and true and affirmed by the gospel. But the opposite is also true. There is a lot that is dehumanizing, degrading, and evil, and the disciple is called to somehow discern the difference between it and what is good. The problem is that unless we are very sensitive to God and can discern the sometimes-blurry

boundaries between right and wrong, or holy and unholy, culture can have as much an effect on us as disciples as we can have on it. In our day, one is left wondering if it is us who are actually being "evangelized" by the prevailing mass culture rather than the other way around.

We do inhabit a church of what some commentators call "Christianity Lite," and, by all accounts, it is us who have been acculturated—not the other way around. We have come to believe through hard experience and lots of reflection that the church has been deeply compromised by aspects of the prevailing culture. Christians now easily reflect the characteristics and the conditions of the wider culture. But what we have gained in relevancy we lose in witness and impact, for "though popular culture holds tremendous potential for good, unfortunately, today's trend is towards a diversionary, mindless, celebrity-driven superficiality. Sadly this reflects our general societal condition, for popular culture can only rise to the spiritual, intellectual, and artistic heights of its average citizenry."² This is not good news for missional Christianity, for if Christianity just mirrors its culture, what is the point of its mission?

This is no excuse to withdraw ourselves from culture, but rather as disciples we must learn to live the tension between gospel and culture, to discern how to hold on to what is true and discard that which is evil (Rom. 12:9). And as agents (missionaries) of the wild Messiah, we also need to interpret and redeem the world/s in which we live. All this goes directly to the issue of discipleship formation and to the reality that the church has largely been unsuccessful at prioritizing disciple making as the primary mission of the church (Matt. 28:16–20). Only disciples formed in the ways of the radical missionary Jesus can make an impact on such a potent cultural system as the one we live and move in.

Willow Creek Association bravely admitted as much in its publication *Reveal*. The report acknowledges that what they've been doing for these many years and what they've

taught millions of others to do is not producing solid disciples of Jesus Christ—numbers, yes, but disciples, no. Bill Hybels admits that “if you simply want a crowd, the ‘seeker sensitive’ model produces results. If you want solid, sincere, mature followers of Christ, it’s a bust.”³ This should actually be of no surprise to us, as Jesus clearly lays out the conditions for following him—he calls for nothing less than death to self. This means that all personal and cultural agendas must be laid down at the foot of Jesus as a precondition to following him. If we, in a sincere attempt to reach contemporary audiences, reconfigure the processes of Christian formation, putting the challenge of discipleship off to the end, then, in our opinion, we are opening the floodgates to being “evangelized” by the culture. When we remove Jesus’s preconditions to following him and use professional mass entertainment (no matter how sincere) to draw people to Christ, we should not be surprised at the results—we simply can’t entertain consumers into becoming disciples, nor can people *consume* their way into following Jesus.

But the problem has even deeper roots than a consumerist church. It stems from the fact that even *before* we come to Christ, we have already been powerfully discipled by pop culture. We come to Jesus as inveterate consumers holding values that often run completely contrary to the ways of the gospel. High capitalism, the market, postmodern superficiality, and the sheer power of the mass media all conspire to ensure that we are already ardent disciples of the gods of the age. It is unlikely that there has ever been a time when the population has been so thoroughly programmed and brainwashed without even knowing it.

Dick Staub warns us of this frightening reality:

The largest companies in the world are spending billions of dollars to drive a diversionary, mindless, celebrity-fueled popular culture down the highway of new technologies and into our lives in order to sell us stuff we don’t want or need. They

don’t care about us, what we believe or how we want to live. The ads and products regularly reduce women to sex objects and men to voyeurs and predators. They are unconcerned with what is in our best interests spiritually or intellectually, and in fact, it is in their best interest to keep us spiritually desensitized and dumb. They play to our unhappiness, magnifying the feeling that we are missing something essential and that if we had this something they offer, we would be fulfilled. They then encourage us to shop, convincing us that shopping will do today what it failed to do yesterday—fill what French religious philosopher Pascal calls the God-shaped vacuum.⁴

This is what we are dealing with, and there is no doubt that it has deeply and indelibly shaped each and every one of us. Being conscious of this fact doesn’t necessarily mean we are free from its pull. For example, when taking a break from writing this book, we found ourselves wandering around the local mall. After about twenty minutes of browsing, we looked at each other and the question occurred to us: what were we doing there? We didn’t need to buy anything, but yet here we were, taking a break in a mall!

To refer to a remarkable movie that explored the totality of the system we are born into, we are born, live, and have our being in “the matrix.” The matrix’s appeal goes deep and reaches into our secret insecurities, our penchant for greed, our desire for status, and our need for love and freedom. If we are going to be untamed followers of the wild Lord of our lives, then we are going to have to deal with these dynamics in our culture. We have to escape from Babylon and return to Zion in order to liberate Babylon. To some of these dynamics we now turn.

The Green God

Martin Luther said three conversions are necessary when a person decides to follow Christ: the conversion of the heart,

the conversion of the mind, and the conversion of the purse. And John Wesley wryly remarked that the last thing to convert was a person's wallet.

Money plays an overpowering, all-encompassing role in history and in our lives. Let's face it: the love of it, and all it represents, reaches into each and every heart. Who can honestly claim to be utterly free from its almost magical appeal? Money is big, powerful, alluring, and very demanding. So we should not be surprised that Jesus would have something to say about it.

And he does. Richard Foster notes that Jesus actually speaks more about money and wealth than any other topic except the kingdom of God! And he goes on to document the evidence.⁶ Jesus devoted time and energy to the issue because he knew the power it wields over our imaginations and lives. In fact, there is no other single thing he describes as being in such direct competition to God as money. Jesus clearly states, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matt. 6:24).

There is no prevarication here, no ambiguity, no getting around it. According to our Master, money exists in opposition to the claims God makes over our lives. And if we are



The Baptism⁵

not careful, mammon and materialism can hinder the work of mission and limit spiritual effectiveness.

Susan Hope, a British missiologist, raises a good question:

Is it just co-incidence that sees lightheartedness about ownership of goods as a context for healing and effective evangelism in the stories of the Early Church? "No good asking me for silver and gold—haven't got any. But I will give you what I have—in the name of Jesus of Nazareth—walk!" (Acts 3:6). "No one claimed any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord" (Acts 4:32–33).⁷

Paul also has the same attitude toward wealth: among other things, he says that the "love" of money is the root of all (or every) kind of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). James the brother of Jesus does not mince words either (James 5:1–5). If we read Jesus and New Testament teaching correctly, we can only understand money if we interpret it in light of the teachings of the principalities and powers against which we must do battle. Money is not a neutral force, but is animated and energized by powers. Therefore our relationship to money is filled with moral power.⁸ Richard Foster is quite clear in stating that money is an idol we must be converted *from* in order to be converted *to* Jesus.

The rejection of the god of mammon is a necessary precondition to becoming a disciple of Jesus. And, in point of fact, money has many of the characteristics of deity. It gives us security, can induce guilt, gives us freedom, gives us power and seems to be omnipresent. Most sinister of all, however, is its bid for omnipotence. . . . It seems that money is not willing to rest content in its proper place alongside other things we value. No, it must have supremacy. It must crowd out all else. We attach importance to it far beyond its worth. In fact we attach ultimate importance to it. It is tremendously instructive to stand back and observe the

frantic scramble of people for money or things related to money [what it can buy and what it can give us]. And this does not occur just among the poor and starving. Quite to the contrary—the super wealthy, who really have nothing to gain by more money, still seek it furiously. The middle class, who are really quite adequately cared for (and who are from a global perspective the wealthy), continue to buy more houses than they need, to acquire more cars than they need, to have more clothes than they need. Many of us could live on half of what we now receive without much serious sacrifice, yet we feel that we are just barely making ends meet [because the world, the media, and the devil are telling us that this is so].⁹

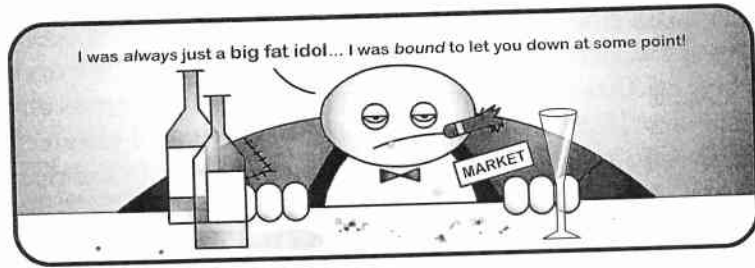
Foster goes on to say that money is one of the principalities and powers that must be conquered and redeemed through the blood of Jesus Christ *before* it can be usable for the greater good of the kingdom of God. To truly walk in the way of Jesus, one must be free of the love of money and the pride that often goes along with it. In the words of our friend and colleague Wes White, “[The wealthy Christians] . . . have to be rescued . . . from the hubris that is usually [associated] with mammon and [which] invariably precludes the presence and power of God.”¹⁰ Once we are rescued, we can be free to be generous, and when we are generous, we are agents of Jesus’s remarkable grace. We cannot overestimate the power of generosity in human relations. Not only does it destroy the power of money, but it introduces the one who receives the gift (as well as the one who gives the gift) into the world of grace.¹¹ Seen this way, giving is actually a sacrament because, as theologian Miroslav Volf says, “every gift breaks the barrier between the sacred and the mundane and floods the mundane with the sacred.”¹²

Volf also suggests, “We’re set up to buy and sell, not to give and receive.”¹³ This means we are trained from a young age to calculate before giving money away rather than to be truly generous. For instance, while Bill Gates’s contribution

to charity is very laudable, it hardly constitutes a “widow’s mite.” It still leaves him as one of the richest men in the world. Being calculatingly generous is not the same as being radically generous. If we are going to engender an ethos of untamed generosity, we will need much healthier images of God than the two commonly held false stereotypes of God as giver, namely, the *Wheeler-Dealer god* and the *Santa Claus god*. Unlike the Wheeler-Dealer god, God generously gives without any semblance of negotiation, because he needs nothing that we have and asks more than we could ever give. God gives simply because he is gracious. On the other hand, the Santa Claus god demands nothing of us. But is it true that God demands nothing of us? No, *God gives so that we can become joyful givers ourselves* rather than self-absorbed receivers or consumers. In the right sense of the term, God’s giving obliges us to respond with *faith* (Rom. 4:5), *gratitude* (2 Cor. 9:15), *availability* (2 Cor. 8:5), and *participation* (Gal. 2:19–20).¹⁴

Play with Maar’kit

Have you ever noticed that financial commentators tend to personify the term “market” with reverence when they use it? Statements such as “The market punished the low profit yields of X company today,” or “The market did this or that” furnish us with the distinct sense that the word is meant to be used with a capital “M” and spoken of with spiritual veneration—more like “*Maar’kit*.” This is a dead giveaway for the religious awe with which many regard its power. What?! Like the market has a personality? It can make choices, determine the outcome of history, provide meaning, and even make judgments over what constitutes good or bad decisions?! In other words, it sounds awfully like *Maar’kit* has actually developed an imposing persona—we are back to that darn idolatry again! And a moody and capricious god it proves to be. Beware, those who submit to it, because *Maar’kit* has a really bad temper—he (or she) gives and takes away, at will.



As followers of Jesus living in the world we happen to inhabit, we need to have our eyes opened to the idolatry of wealth that is the basis of Western society. For instance, Victor Lebeau, a leading post-war economist, in what must surely be a defining comment on the nature of the society we live in, said,

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption. . . . We need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever accelerating rate.¹⁵

Andy Warhol famously quipped that buying is much more American than thinking! Apparently Nobel-winning economist Milton Friedman thinks it is in the economy's best interest to keep it that way: "Few trends could so thoroughly undermine the very foundations of our free society as the acceptance by corporate officials of a social responsibility other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible. This is a fundamentally subversive doctrine."¹⁶ Talk about the justification of Gordon Gekko's famous dictum that greed is good!

We moved to California and began our research for this book at a very historic time—the 2008 election. One of the things in the lead-up to the election was of course the systemic stock market crash. People were frantic, clutching for their

dollars before they disappeared. At the height of the panic, it was interesting to note that as debates about what to do about the crisis were underway, massive bailouts and all, no one mentioned even the *possibility* of actually closing down the stock markets so that market raiders wouldn't exploit the situation or shareholders couldn't sell in a panicky way. And yet that would have resolved the immediate issues involved in the crisis—panic selling resulting in a market crash. No, it seems that *Maar'kit* and his devotees would not put up with that. It just goes to show that the market plays way too important of a role in our lives. Surely there are other criteria for followers of Jesus to make serious judgments by other than money.

Directly related to the role of money and wealth in society is the increasingly powerful religion of consumerism.

Oh Lord, Won't You Buy Me a Mercedes-Benz . . .

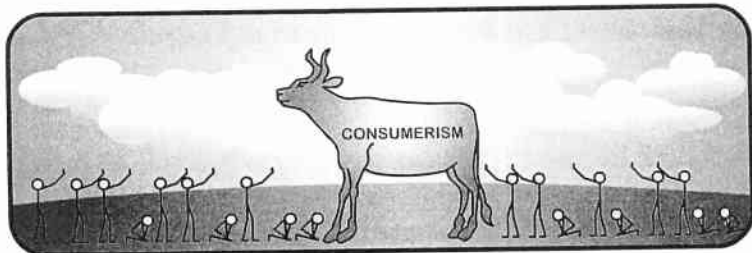
Alan was initially trained in marketing and advertising before becoming a follower of Jesus, and both he and I (Deb) are at least "working" theologians. When we look at the power of consumerism and the market in our lives, we are thoroughly convinced that we are dealing with a very significantly *religious* phenomenon: if the role of religion is to mediate a sense of identity, purpose, meaning, and community, it can be said that consumerism fulfills *all* these criteria.¹⁷

For instance, some now use the term "expressive capital" to

Using Truth for Dollars

Contemporary practices in advertising and marketing are explicitly exploiting religious motivations in people! Alan recently had a chilling conversation with an advertising guru who stated that "best practice in marketing is taking on where the church has left off. As Christianity vacates Western society, we are stepping right in to fill the gap." In fact, this is precisely the sin of Satan—to use truth for ends other than those for which it was intended.

brand and sell products. This is the current ideology behind marketing, and it teaches that “at the center of every human soul is the intense longing to be closer to God.” A brand that can empathize with that is “powerful,” and “the market for something to believe in is infinite.”¹⁸ This thinking gets close to being demonic, because it exploits people at the deepest possible level: the level of meaning and existence. In order to sell products in an increasingly competitive market comprised of innumerable consumer niches, subcultures, tastes, and preferences, marketing strategies have had to reach deeper and deeper into the human soul to make a sale. Appeal to basic needs will not do in our culture. Marketing strategy now explicitly exploits the vacuum of spirituality left by the vacating of Christianity from the public imagination. Marketing has stepped in where the church has stepped out.



The new “golden calf.”

Consumerism now provides a direct link between personal happiness and the purchase and consumption of material possessions. It involves basing one’s identity, including one’s sense of “community,” in a brand, and making choices in an attempt to find meaning in shopping and consuming. For most people in Western contexts, *shopping is spirituality*. It is an attempt to find meaning and happiness in the product. And we all do it! Let’s face it: for most of us, when we go to the mall, we are not simply doing it to fulfill basic survival needs. We are seeking something else! When

we buy a house, a car (or a second car, for that matter), fashion items, or electronics, far more than “basic” needs are being indulged in. Seeking status, identity, fulfillment, and happiness is often our ulterior motivation, rather than meeting basic needs.

Once again we are back to idolatry: the attempt to establish meaning and purpose on our own terms outside of a relationship with God—or as theologian Paul Tillich defined it, giving ultimate value to that which is not ultimate. Because of the total pervasiveness of consumerism and the dominance of the market, this presents a far more insidious challenge to the claims of Jesus over our lives because, in so many ways, it infects each and every one of us.

As Helen Trinca and Catherine Fox note,

For many of us, buying the goods and services we want does wonders psychologically. When we spend, we see the rewards of our hard work. Once those rewards were more abstract. We may have felt happy when we were doing our duty to God or to a community, or enjoyed the feeling that work was itself a virtuous activity, a good thing to do. Our reward for work was financial but also spiritual or religious. Materialism, hedonism, the linking of happiness with consumption were all regarded as dubious pursuits in a religious age. . . . Consumption has filled the vacuum of meaning in the 21st century and plays a powerful role in ambitions. You may not get an interesting job—after all, not everyone can—but you can moderate the anger and sadness at missing out by buying hard, by acquiring goods that describe you and how you live your life.¹⁹

Mark Sayers, a good friend of ours, has noted that one of the most alluring religious appeals of consumerism is that it offers us a new immediacy, a living alternative to what heaven has always stood for in the Judeo-Christian tradition—the fulfillment of all our longings. We have at our fingertips experiences and goods only available to kings

in previous eras. Because we are offered “heaven now,” we give up the ultimate quest in pursuit of that which can be immediately consumed, be it a service, product, or pseudo-religious experience. Consumerism has all the distinguishing traits of outright paganism—we need to see it for what it really is.²⁰

Jesus said, “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after [desire, search for] all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt. 6:31–33). When we try to establish meaning and fulfillment in the way that advertisers would have us do, we basically act as “pagans” do. Consumerism as a religious phenomenon is as thoroughly pagan as worshipping Baal. Seen in this light, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Big Brother*, and other lifestyle shows are some of the most pagan, and *paganizing*, shows on TV. Even the perennial favorites about renovating the house paganize us because they focus us on that which so easily enslaves us. In these, the banality of consumerism reaches a climax as we are sold the lie that the thing that will complete us is a new kitchen or a house extension. In fact, these only add more stress to our mortgages and our families.²¹ These shows are far more successful promoters of unbelief than even outright intellectual atheism because they hit us at that place where we must render our trust and loyalty. And most people are profoundly susceptible to the idolatrous allure of money and things. We do well to remember what our Lord said about serving two masters and desiring things (Matt. 6:24–33).

Discipleship is all about adherence to Christ. It is always articulated and experienced over and against all other competing claims for our loyalty and allegiance. When diversion and entertainment become a way of life, “we avoid the very issues to which we should be most attentive. We are diverted

from the grim, unpleasant truth that our lives lack meaning without God, that consumption does not satisfy, that the differential between wealth and poverty is unjust, and that the appropriate human response to people in need is sleeves-rolled-up service, not simply watching.”²²