

Consumerism and Christianity:  
An Analysis and Response from a Christian Perspective

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## Introduction

I began this project out of concern with the widespread acceptance of consumerism and materialism by Christians within the United States of America. I started with the assumption that consumerism is a way of life that is in direct contrast to the Christian lifestyle. Americans daily engage in money rituals; in fact we rarely leave the house without using money in some form, even if it is money that has already been exchanged for a product such as a car or the gas that runs the car. As is widely known, money has long been problematic for Christians. This belief by Christians stems from Scriptures such as 1 Timothy 6:10 which tells us that “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”<sup>1</sup> So although Christians should not love money and the things that money can buy, Christians cannot survive without participating in these money rituals.

Therefore, I asked how we might consume in a way that God intended when humans were created without crossing over the line into consumerism and materialism. Research suggested that there is no obvious answer since every person lives in a different economic situation. A plausible suggestion is that Christians need to have the right attitude about money. As Christians we must ask ourselves if we are loving money and honoring ourselves with our money or loving God and honoring God with our money. This made me wonder if I was asking the right question about the effect that consumerism has on Christians in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. I wondered if the effect of consumerism goes deeper than just one’s attitude towards money.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

A book written by Vincent Miller titled *Consuming Religion*<sup>2</sup> opened my eyes to the idea that consumerism has an effect on Christianity because it inclines us to consume religion in a similar manner to how we consume goods and services in our culture. This was a new idea to me, but as I looked back at previous research I had done, I saw thoughts from other authors that hinted at this scholar's idea. I found ideas that explained how we are trying to substitute goods to meet real needs, and that consumerism has disconnected us from communities, nature, our family and ourselves. However none of these authors made the jump to where Miller is in his thoughts. One brief example of Miller's thought process is that just as we consume products without knowing where they came from or who made them, we take in aspects of religion without knowing the tradition and context of the teaching.

Therefore, amidst an array of literature that tends to condemn consumerism because it encourages Christians to focus on themselves by buying more and more, I chose to explore Miller's path. As other authors pointed out, we do not have obvious instructions telling us how to engage with consumerism. Instead, we must learn how the culture we are living in affects our faith. A short example that helps to explain the impact consumerism has on Christianity is the power to pick and choose. This pick and choose mentality of consumerism encourages people to engage Christianity outside of its intended community, which is the Church. An atheist can enter a bookstore, or simply enter into the online world of Amazon, and read hundreds of books written about the Christian faith. They can read all of the literature and cognitively understand what

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, (New York, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2003), 30.

Christianity is but they will not experience the truth of Christianity since they are not in the community of believers for which the truth is intended.

Another aspect of consumerism is a lack of commitment to products. Americans always want the next best thing. Businesses are always coming out with new products that encourage us to throw away the old one and buy the new item. There is no need to commit to one item and take good care of it since there is always another one sitting on the shelf. This mentality of moving on quickly to new things spills over into the faith. An example of this is church hopping where a believer likes the music at one church, the preaching at another, and still the people at a different church. The believer regularly visits different churches instead of committing to one, which makes it extremely difficult for them to form the deep relationships that are important to growing in faith through the support of a community. These are just a couple of examples of how the consumer culture of the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century affects the Christian faith.

Exploring how consumerist habits detrimentally influence religious practices has the potential to shed important light on the contemporary church in the United States. It will be especially helpful for Christian leaders as they try to understand how they can combat the negative aspects of living in a consumer culture. Consumerism is a distortion of what God intended for life on earth. Christians need to understand that God did create us as consumers. However, God did not create us to consume with the habits and practices that the consumerism lifestyle encourages. I have struggled personally as a Christian trying to live in our culture in a way that is honoring to God. I hope that by addressing ways that we consume religion, I will be able to offer thoughts on how not to consume faith but to have a committed faith.

To address these ideas, the following pages will expound upon a quotation found in an article written by Shannon L. Jung published in the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*. Jung says, “The image of humanity maintained in a consumer society is that human beings naturally pursue their own individual desires in isolation from others.”<sup>3</sup> I see four parts to this quotation that will become the focus of each section of my thesis. Each section will begin by explaining how an aspect of the culture we live in affects how we think about and interact in the world. I will then take time in each section to comment on how these aspects of our culture are different than Christianity and suggest how as Christians we could take a different perspective.

The first chapter includes the “Image of Humanity Maintained in a Consumer Society” section of the quotation and begins to define consumerism and consumer society. Consumer society has a big impact on how and what people value. For example, because of the American Dream, we value success which is gained by working to earn a pay check to be able to buy a house, a car, and a dog. People are valued for what skills they have that allow them to produce more. Human knowledge is only valued in terms of technical intelligence. This is opposite of Christianity where we are instructed to pursue the fruit of the Spirit and value people who bear that fruit. Scripture instructs Christians on the correct attitude to have towards money instead of only valuing things for their monetary worth like consumer society encourages.

“Human Beings Naturally Pursue” is the second part of the quotation. The habits and practices of consumer culture have become natural to Americans. Although we cannot escape consumerism, we can escape mindlessly participating in money rituals and

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<sup>3</sup> Jung, Shannon L. “The Reeducation of Desire in a Consumer Culture.” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 32 no 1 (Spring-Summer 2012): 21-38.

unthinkingly pursuing money. Focusing on how we were created by God and for what purpose helps us to avoid carelessly consuming. We were created by a relational God to be in a relationship with God. Thus, we were naturally created to lovingly pursue God and love God's creation. It is important to understand that living in a consumerist society is not bad because we were created to consume by God, but we must think about what we are consuming and what we desire to gain through consumption.

Section three presents the piece of the quotation that says "their own individual desires." Here I discuss desires and the existence of scarcity because we desire things for ourselves. Advertising plays a big role in distorting desires in our society as their goal is to create in us a desire for an item we may not have considered. Advertisers attach feelings and emotions to items, which only lets us down when we consume that item and are not fulfilled as expected. Christians are called to not just think about our own individual desires but should think about how what we consume affects others. It is important to understand that commodities will not fulfill us because we can only be ultimately fulfilled by God.

I conclude with a discussion on how we consume in "isolation from others." This section will focus on the detachment and disconnect that exists in consumer culture. We consume items without having any idea where they came from or who made the items. Rarely do we make things ourselves because it is so easy to just go out and buy it at a cheap price. Because we are so used to being detached from items, we also tend to detach from the relationships we have with people. It is important as Christians to attach to the people around us and grow together as God's people.

As Christians living in the United States of America today, we live in a consumer culture. The goal of this paper is to begin to explore the habits and practices of consumer culture that make up consumerism. A definition of consumerism will grow throughout this paper, including what it is and what prompts the lifestyle of consumerism. Many questions have arisen about consumerism and the effects it has on Christianity while writing, but I cannot begin to address all of them. My intentions are that this paper will encourage readers to think critically about how they consume in everyday life. A deeper understanding of consumer culture and the effect that it has on how and what we consume will help to prompt intentionality towards a healthier way of consuming and practicing the Christian faith in everyday life.

## “The Image of Humanity Maintained in a Consumer Society”

### Chapter 1

When a group of people accepts and lives according to a set of values and beliefs, they make up a culture. Due to its geographic size, the United States of America has a variety of cultures specific to locality including the South, Midwest, East Coast and West Coast. Culture can also be determined by how a person chooses to spend their time; a person can be part of the farm culture, bar culture, or college culture. Although there are various cultures Americans can identify with, they are all united in a consumer culture as it crosses all areas of diversity.

Consumer culture is found throughout the entire United States and even affects those who do their best to avoid this way of living. For example, the Amish are well-known for choosing to wear plain clothes and for choosing not to use electricity and technology due to their religious beliefs. Although they avoid excessive consumption themselves by making much of what they consume, the Amish clearly take advantage of Americans who do consume a lot. Amish do this by opening countless restaurants and shops for tourists to buy deliciously fattening pie and unnecessary knick-knacks. Thus, even though the Amish try not to participate in consumerism, they are still members of a consumer society and participate in that by selling to consumers who embrace consumer culture.

America is a consumer society which means that consuming plays an important role in creating identity. As a consumer, a person's identity is based on what they consume and the amount of money they have available to consume items unnecessary for survival. Consumer culture is created when all of the aspects of consumerism,

consumption and consumer society come together to change how humans function on a daily basis. In America, we have developed habits and practices of consumption that we use to consume material items such as food, clothing, cars and gadgets. We also use these practices and habits to consume non-material things that we come into contact with such as other people and religion.<sup>4</sup>

A very basic definition of consumerism is “high levels of consumption.”<sup>5</sup> This is similar to materialism but goes further than just the overvaluing of material objects. Consumption is not just about the act of buying something but the whole process. The process includes dreaming, shopping, buying, personalizing, and disposing of a good.<sup>6</sup> For example, when a couple needs a new car they begin by dreaming about buying a new one long before their current car needs replacement. Then when the time comes for replacement, the couple starts shopping. Eventually they buy the car, and then make it their own by adding a special air freshener or maybe even reindeer antlers around Christmas time. Soon the excitement of a new car wears off. The couple then begins dreaming of the next car they will buy. Eventually they will dispose of the one they had focused on for so long and begin the process again. Consumption is not an act we commit once or twice a week but constantly. Because the process of consumption takes up so much of our thoughts, that is the majority of what we think about and thus we fall into the high levels of consumption that begin to define consumerism.

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6.

Two main pieces have contributed to creating a consumer culture in America: capitalism and the American Dream. Our capitalist economy contributed by increasing productivity so there are more items for people to buy with the increased wages capitalism generated. The American dream then encouraged people to consume these products as the means to the end goal of a happy life. A pre-capitalist view of labor was that “a man does not by nature wish to earn more and more money but simply to live as he is accustomed.”<sup>7</sup> Capitalism changed this traditional view to the belief that each person should work to amass great wealth so he or she can buy goods and services excessively. The Puritans played an important role in the rise and acceptance of capitalism by spreading the belief, especially through Christian circles, that God calls humans to work hard. The Puritans based this way of living off of the Scripture verse 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” The ideal of working for the glory of God has diminished since many people today work only for the pay check they will receive at the end of the week.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the purpose of labor is now to earn more money so one can continuously try to surpass his or her current standard of living.<sup>9</sup>

The history of U.S. capitalism includes a continual increase in productivity which led to an increase in wages over the years. This created the belief that each generation would live better than the previous generations since increased wages meant an ability to

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Wuthnow, ed. *Rethinking Materialism: Perspectives on the Spiritual Dimension of Economic Behavior*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 146.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 182.

<sup>9</sup> Roman Espejo, ed. *Consumerism: Opposing Viewpoints*, (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010), 86.

buy more goods and services that were more expensive. However, according to Espejo, in the 1970's real wages stopped rising, but people still continued to buy so they could increase their standard of living. This led to working more hours, more people per household working, and an increase in loans and debt.<sup>10</sup> Even though they could not afford it, people continued to buy according to the consumer habits they had developed. Debt is an enormous problem for both individual households and the entire nation. The lifestyle practices and habits that lead to debt stem from the overall desire to live better than previous generations.

The American Dream is the belief that “In the United States freedom includes opportunities to obtain prosperity, success, and upward social mobility through hard work no matter what an individual’s racial, religious, or economic background is.”<sup>11</sup> Thus the end goal of the American Dream is ultimately a “better life.” This is a respectable goal but the American Dream is not just about the end goal; the “better life” typically refers to a particular style of living. Elements of someone living the American Dream include a house with a white picket fence, a happy family and a well-paying job. The dream is that the acquisition of these elements will create happiness. By itself, there does not appear to be anything wrong with the American Dream, until the desire to “keep up with the Joneses” creeps in. The need to be at the top of the social ladder because of the material items one has can be very stressful. This stress is definitely a reality for middle-class

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<sup>10</sup> Espejo, *Consumerism*, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Meredith Eliassen, “American Dream (ethos),” *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, (Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2014).

citizens who find it almost impossible to embody the dream without the help of consumer credit.<sup>12</sup>

The pursuit of the American dream and growth of capitalism have changed what Americans value. Value has been taken over by the economy. According to Robert Wuthnow, things that have little monetary value carry less significance in our culture.<sup>13</sup> Valuing objects with economic worth has transferred into the human realm. Human knowledge and skills have been reduced to technical knowledge and skills.<sup>14</sup> For instance, college students might value their major courses, which will allow them to be successful in the work force, over the general education courses that give students a broader knowledge base. Value is given to objects and knowledge that help a person “keep up with the Joneses.” The focus is on that end goal of a “better life.” Thus, only the means that will help a person to reach that life are valued. A happy or joyful life is not the end goal. The end goal is a “better life” which indicates that there is always something better to be grasped. Therefore, complete satisfaction is always just out of reach.

The American dream is always pushing us to achieve a “better life” with things that will not ultimately make us happy when we gain them. Chasing the dream in the American consumer culture is only a “pleasant and thus deceptive detour from where true joys are to be found.”<sup>15</sup> As a Christian, I believe that true joys can be found only when

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<sup>12</sup> Calder, *Financing the American Dream*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Wuthnow, *Rethinking Materialism*, 106.

<sup>14</sup> John, F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 39.

<sup>15</sup> Calder, *Financing the American Dream*, 33.

one is in a relationship with the one true God. The reason it is so difficult to chase after God and ignore consumer practices is because “the encounter with God always takes place within the structures of human social and political existence.”<sup>16</sup> We cannot escape consumer culture, its practices and its habits, just as the Israelites in the Old Testament could not escape the practices of Baalism that surrounded them. We live in a consumer culture and society and must learn how to function within it, while still identifying as Christians.

Not only is consumerism challenging to disengage from because it is the culture we live in, but also because it revolves around money. Money has a negative connotation for Christians. First Timothy 6:10 says, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.” During the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:24, Jesus teaches “no one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.” These are both clear cut Scripture passages that condemn the love of money. What makes it so difficult for Christians in America today to avoid the love of money is that we cannot function without money. Almost every day we spend money on food, transportation, housing, or clothing. It is not often that we manage to go a day without opening up a wallet. Even if we do, we still use a car that has previously paid for gas in it to go home to a building for which we regularly get a rent or mortgage bill.

We spend money all the time which means that people who have money also have power. Having money gives one the power to purchase food, transportation and housing to survive. Though in America, we typically buy more than is necessary for survival.

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<sup>16</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 164.

Money also gives power in the form of status.<sup>17</sup> An example of this is our political system. It takes a lot of money to run an election campaign. Therefore, those who have money can get themselves elected into positions that give them the power to make decisions for those who do not.

Money not only gives a person power if they have it, but money itself has the power to define what is important. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, college is an expectation for many high school graduates as college education is the means to the end goal of a job that pays well and gives stability to one's life. To make a lot of money, college is often an important step and is most often where someone learns the technical skills that are valued in America. But, education has not always had this focus. For example, the Sunday School movement, initiated by Robert Raikes in 1780, was created to educate children who worked in factories every day but Sunday. They were taught to read the Bible, memorize catechism, and display moral character.<sup>18</sup> At that time, being a follower of God was highly valued. The main purpose of this model of education was to know God better and live according to Leviticus 11:44-45, "You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy." For Robert Raikes, Sunday School was valued because it taught believers about God, not because the knowledge learned at Sunday School had monetary value. Now we tend to focus our time and energy on pursuits such as college that will help us to make more money in the end.

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<sup>17</sup> Steve Wilkens, and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories that Shape our Lives*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2009), 46.

<sup>18</sup> Roger White, James Estep, and Karen Estep, *Mapping Out Curriculum in Your Church*, (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 85.

In consumer culture, we also love money because it is considered to be the solution to all problems. The idea that all problems can be reduced to money is reductionist.<sup>19</sup> This train of thought can be clearly illustrated through the popular term “retail therapy,” in which a person, often pictured as a woman, has a bad day and needs to go shopping and spend some money to find happiness again. Another belief held by many is “If I only had more money...” which can be finished by any number of statements. One possibility is that if I only had more money I could work less and spend more time with my spouse to improve our marriage. Here, money becomes the solution to improving the state of a couple’s marriage. However, according to a survey conducted by Citibank in the United States, fifty-seven percent of couples who divorce claim that financial disagreements were the primary cause of their marriage ending.<sup>20</sup> Money caused problems in these marriages instead of fixing them. At some point, we need to realize that money will not fix our problems and sometimes even causes them.

Money is everywhere so we cannot live in America without regularly using money. But what we must notice in the passages from 1 Timothy and Matthew is that both refer to loving or serving money. Thus when we ask ourselves how we as Christians can avoid loving and serving money, the answer is to reflect on our attitudes. Thinking critically about how we use our money is a big step in the right direction, which is away from loving money and towards loving God.

While consumer values are often associated with monetary worth, we can learn what Christians are to value in 1 Timothy 4:7-8, “Have nothing to do with irreverent,

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<sup>19</sup> Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> “Why Money is the Leading Cause of Divorce.” *Jet*, Vol. 91, Issue 1, (Chicago, Illinois: Johnson Publishing).

silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” We are not to focus on the silly myths that our culture tells us are important but to focus on God. We must be led by the Spirit and embody the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” Valuing these characteristics in ourselves and others is what we are called to do. This is in contrast to the things of the flesh that are listed in the proceeding passage of Galatians 5:19-21 that will lead us away from God. Embodying godliness and the fruit of the Spirit is a big step in the right direction toward having a correct attitude about money and what we are really supposed to pursue in life: the kingdom of God.

I previously stated that consumer culture is created when all of the aspects of consumerism, consumption and consumer society come together to change how humans function on a daily basis. Following this reasoning, one can determine that Christian culture is when the foundational beliefs of Christianity change how we function on a daily basis. Change can be as simple as giving up a four dollar latte once a week and donating that money to an organization such as the Stark County Hunger Task Force which can then provide twenty eight pounds of food to hungry people.<sup>21</sup>

We can also choose to change in a little more extreme ways. Instead of buying presents for loved ones at holidays, try donating most of the money you would spend on presents and hand make something special. These are just a few changes that can help us to approach each day from a Christian perspective tinted with consumerism instead of a

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<sup>21</sup> The Stark County Hunger Task Force is able to provide seven pounds of food to the hungry for every one dollar that is donated. <http://starkhunger.org/take-action/donate/>

consumer mindset with a slight tint of Christianity. Christians cannot escape consumer culture but we also cannot mindlessly participate in the practices and habits of consumer culture. Instead of only valuing someone for their money and technical intelligence, it is important to look through a Christian lens when viewing people and value them for who they are as children of God.

## “Human Beings Naturally”

### Chapter 2

The consumer culture of the United States of America has affected how Americans experience satisfaction and fulfillment. The habits and practices of our consumer culture affect how we function on a daily basis, and these practices are so imbedded in us we barely think about their effects. It is natural for us to value money and replace people with material items because we have been told that is how we are to function. Advertising plays a huge role in changing how we think and function daily. Advertisers suggest that acquiring certain clothes, electronics, or many other things will change one's life for the better. Overall, today Americans have more but are less happy, and young Americans are at a higher risk of depression than in the past.<sup>22</sup> Research has not proven a direct link, but it seems that Americans are acquiring things and not experiencing the happiness they expected. It has become natural to expect fulfillment from work, money and things. However, true satisfaction and happiness is not reached through any of these things.

Materialism and consumerism are social problems that seem unavoidable as they are the way most Americans naturally function. They are hard to avoid even if you are working more to get more money for a good reason. Parents sometimes choose higher mortgage payments that cause them to work more and spend less time with their kids. According to these parents, the sacrifice is worth it, if it means they can live in a safer neighborhood that is part of a better school district.<sup>23</sup> The desire by parents to provide

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<sup>22</sup> Espejo, *Consumerism: Opposing Viewpoints*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Wuthnow, *Rethinking Materialism*, 2.

the best opportunities for their children often times manifests itself in a fixation on money and the things money can buy, like a new house.

Americans sometimes hear messages that consumerism is bad and corrupting but there are more powerful messages that tell us consumerism is where the good life lies.<sup>24</sup> Many of these more powerful messages come from advertisers trying to sell us their products. The lines are blurred between the material and spiritual worlds and we look to material things to fulfill our spiritual needs. There are many things we do that we believe will fulfill our needs and the needs of others. Just one example is that we think the way to show someone you love them is to buy them expensive things. This expectation is in many of the movies we watch and the books we read, so it is easy to think that this is a valid way to show love to someone else.

Consumer culture seems so natural to us that it becomes difficult to criticize its damaging effects without a small voice inside of us admitting we want the good life for ourselves. It is even easy to justify desiring riches with the argument that “if only I was rich, I could do so much good...”<sup>25</sup> I know I’ve thought about what I would do if I won the lottery. The idea of giving a million dollars away to people in need is definitely a satisfying thought. But it is also nice to imagine never having to worry about paying off college loans and being able to drive a new car off the lot without incurring a loan. Enjoying a five course meal also sounds like a great way to spend an evening. The desire to consume and the act of consuming are not bad, unlike consumerism which encourages us to consume everything we see at all times.

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<sup>24</sup> Wuthnow, *Rethinking Materialism*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Wuthnow, *Rethinking Materialism*, 11.

It is necessary for Christians to differentiate between consumerism, previously defined as high levels of consumption, and consuming. We need to remove the negative connotation that consuming has because God created us as consumers. In Genesis 1, God created plants and food and told mankind in verse 29 that all those things “will be yours for food.” Humans were created to consume. It is impossible to survive without consuming because our bodies need nutrients and energy to live which we procure by consuming food. “Therefore, assuming that life (and a complete one at that) is a good thing, it is impossible to say that the consumption that makes life possible is bad.”<sup>26</sup> Christians need to ensure consumption is a relative good and not fall into consumerism by making it an absolute good. We make it an absolute good when we think all our needs can be satisfied by consuming and look for fulfillment in accumulating wealth and the things that accompany wealth.

If consuming is a relative good, then what is the absolute good for humans? To discover this, it is first important to determine the nature of humanity. Many views exist but a relevant view claims humans are strictly economic beings. This view, generally held by communists, claims that when humans have the economic power to provide food, clothing and housing, the most significant of human needs, for themselves and anyone dependent upon them, then humans have completed their purpose on earth.<sup>27</sup> Viewing humans as economic beings is similar to saying that we are strictly consuming beings. The importance of food, clothing and housing for humans is easy to see but this view falls short of communicating the complete nature of humanity. As many people

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<sup>26</sup> Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998), 489.

throughout history can attest to, these things can all be attained and still a person can be unsatisfied.

The Christian view of humanity is that we are made by God in his image. First of all, this means that we are made by God purposefully. It also means that humans are set apart from all other creatures because we are made in the image of God. Being image bearers of God is what makes us innately human. This means that we are gifted with the opportunity to be in a personal relationship with God and respond to God. Bearing God's image also gives humans an eternal future because God our creator is eternal. So although physical health is important in this life, it is not all that matters.

All these aspects of being made in the image of God add up to the fact that we get our value from God. We cannot simply take into account ourselves and our own happiness when searching for what is the absolute good since we were created by God and our value comes from God. Erickson argues, "we are fulfilled only when serving and loving [God]. It is then that satisfaction comes, as a by-product of commitment to God."<sup>28</sup> Our fulfillment comes when we follow what Jesus deemed as the two greatest commandments in Matthew 22:37-39, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus was able to sum up the entire law in these two commandments because if we follow these two commandments daily, then we will be serving and loving God. We love God with every part of us according to the first command and we serve God by loving his people.

Genesis 1:26-27 tells us that God created humans in his image and that humans originally existed in this intended form. Then in Genesis 3 the Fall is recorded and after

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<sup>28</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 494.

that humans still bear God's image but in a twisted form that was not originally intended. This distortion is why it is so difficult for us to find value in serving and loving God only, instead of searching for value by consuming material items. Other than Adam and Eve before the Fall, there is only one other human to have existed in humanity's perfect form: Jesus Christ. Jesus exemplified love for both God and people when he fulfilled his mission on earth. Jesus laid down his life so that all humanity could one day be restored to a perfect relationship with God.

All humans are image-bearers of God, and Jesus' teaching helps us to understand how we can bear God's image in the way God originally intended. Jesus is the mediator between humans and God. Following Jesus is the way for humans to reach a relationship with God. In John 6:35, Jesus teaches, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Material things, such as food and water, do not ultimately sustain or fulfill us. We are sustained by a right relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus fasted forty days, during which he communed with God and was sustained by God. In this life Jesus had to eat eventually just as we do, but our eternal life comes from the sustenance of Jesus Christ.

One discipline that helps us to sustain a right relationship with Jesus Christ is fasting. Fasting helps to take one's focus off of physical items and project it onto discerning God's will. Often in the Bible, fasting is done in conjunction with prayer when an important decision needs to be made.<sup>29</sup> We are not instructed to fast every day. Quite the opposite is true. In Genesis 2:9 God created "trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food." They were not just edible and sustaining. They also looked good

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<sup>29</sup> One example is Paul and Barnabas fasting in Acts 14:23 to determine the elders for churches and commit them to the Lord. See also Acts 13:2.

and pleasurable. We read in the Bible of how the Israelites celebrated important events such as the Passover and Exodus with feasts. They did not fast in mournful remembrance. Instead, they celebrated God's deliverance by eating together.

The teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, also mentions this theme of feasting in chapter 3:12-13 by saying, "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man." James Limburg argues that the main theme of Ecclesiastes is joy.<sup>30</sup> Ecclesiastes begins in 1:2 by saying, "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." The word translated as vanity, *hevel*, is often used to mean mist or breath. Thus by using this term Qoheleth is saying that life is empty or insignificant. The main point *hevel* makes is that life under the sun does not last. This theme runs throughout the book that life under the sun is meaningless, *hevel*.<sup>31</sup> The author asks what it is that gives life meaning and explores the options of work (1:3-11), education (1:12-18) and pleasure (2:1-11) but deems none of these a suitable answer. Qoheleth then states in 2:24, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." He then continues that none of these things bring ultimate fulfillment. However, if they are in their proper place within a right relationship with God then we can find joy in them.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, it is important that when we consume we keep our focus on God and not mindlessly consume in the ways that consumerism encourages.

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<sup>30</sup> James Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for Our Time*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 137.

<sup>31</sup> Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*, 33.

Ecclesiastes' most famous verses are in chapter three, which say there is a time for everything and only God knows the timing. We as humans do not know his timing. We do not understand God or how God works. We wonder why things happen but the only answer we have is 'who knows?' This is where the verse from 3:12 is important because it says that although we do not know how God works, we do know that we must take joy in life. God has given us the gifts of people, food and satisfaction, so we must be thankful for these gifts and take great joy in them every day.<sup>33</sup> God created things for us to consume and enjoy. God also created us in his image. When we consume, we should be joyful and thankful for what God has gifted to us but we must also remember that these things by themselves will never fulfill us. We were naturally created so that only when we love and serve God are we truly fulfilled.

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<sup>33</sup> Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*, 46.

## “Their Own Individual Desires”

### Chapter 3

Consumer culture operates under the belief that human desires are endless. Humans continue to consume because their desires are never satisfied by what they are consuming. However, what people choose to focus their desires on can be negative because they so often focus on objects that do not ultimately satisfy.<sup>34</sup> I have previously defined consumerism as “high levels of consumption.” One of the practices of consumerism is to pursue one’s own individual desires. This practice helps to explain why there are such high levels of consumption. A person continues to consume excessively because he or she is never content with any one thing.<sup>35</sup> If the thing that has long been dreamed of becomes a reality then a new dream takes its place.

As explained in chapter one, consumption is about the entire process of buying something, not just the actual moment when money is exchanged for the item. One reason for this is that the pleasure no longer comes just from possessing objects but in the pursuit of those objects.<sup>36</sup> Especially in the world of technology, companies are always working to upstage one another and even themselves. For example, Apple Inc. continues to release new and updated versions of the iPhone and loyal fans continue to update to the new model. The old iPhone 5 still functions great but when announcements about the iPhone 6 were made, people got excited and joined the pursuit to be one of the first owners. Most of them probably did not need a new phone but got a lot of pleasure from

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<sup>34</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 90.

<sup>35</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, xi.

<sup>36</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 91.

pursuing the new model. By now, they are probably just waiting for the iPhone 7 that everyone knows will show up in the marketplace soon.

As Apple Inc. has clearly shown, growth by a company in today's economy depends not only on reaching a new audience but also on changing the nature of the object they are trying to sell.<sup>37</sup> It is not hard for companies to reach millions of people in seconds because of today's social media but convincing them to buy a product can be hard. Companies are constantly updating and improving to give consumers a new object to pursue. Sharon Zukin even argues in her book *Point of Purchase* that we should shop in order to pursue ideals of pleasure and the value of public space. Shopping is a national pastime with the well-known motto of "shop till you drop."<sup>38</sup> People shop so they can discover new items. These new items, as well as the process of shopping, give people pleasure.

Advertising plays the biggest role in affecting the desires of individuals because advertising fuels consumption. "Advertising is the art of arresting the human intelligence just long enough to get money from it."<sup>39</sup> Advertisers work to get people to buy on impulse instead of taking the time to think and realize whatever they might want to buy in the moment is not something they need or even really want that badly. An advertiser's goal is to grab people's attention and create a desire within them to buy a thing they never knew was needed. Returning to the previous example, iPhone 5 owners do not need an iPhone 6 but advertisers stir up their desire to have one. Advertising has been

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<sup>37</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 68.

<sup>38</sup> Zukin, Sharon. *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*. New York, New York: Routledge, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Espejo, *Consumerism*, 66.

made into a science and there are many aspects of it that work together to convince consumers to buy products to fulfill their desires. This is not an assessment of advertising and its practices but of the effects that advertising has on consumers. It is easy as consumers to get tricked by advertising and buy things we do not need. This can happen quickly on a cheap item in the checkout line. It can also happen over a long period of time while saving up money for a brand new car. Both of these instances are purchases that are not necessary. We fall into patterns of addiction, meaning patterns of consumption without need.<sup>40</sup> We can be addicted to a certain item such as coffee, a brand, such as Apple Inc., or just the pleasure that comes with shopping and consuming. This addiction of consuming can quickly grow out of control since advertising convinces us the next item is necessary to our happiness.

Advertising is able to take our minds from want to need by convincing us that the item we are buying will bring us ultimate satisfaction. Jewelry commercials are especially good at this by associating their jewelry with happiness, joy and love. The couples in the commercials portray the idea that buying a special bracelet or diamond will fix a relationship and rekindle their love for each other. Advertising no longer describes the qualities and virtues of a product, such as the cut and clarity of a diamond, but instead create visions of the ways in which their product can transform the life of the consumer.<sup>41</sup> The advertising focuses not just on the object but the satisfaction that the object will bring. When primary sources of satisfaction such as love and meaning are not met, then

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<sup>40</sup> Espejo, *Consumerism*, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 87.

we as humans try to replace them with secondary sources of satisfaction.<sup>42</sup> These secondary sources can be found in more extreme measures such as drugs or alcohol or in something as simple as fast food. For example, the Happy Meal at McDonalds is clearly promising the parent that their child will be happy if they eat there. For obvious reasons it is not called the Sad Meal.

Constantly pursuing these secondary sources of satisfaction will never truly satisfy a consumer as they are just shadows of the primary sources. Consumers will always be longing for something more if they only consume things that mimic sources of true fulfillment. When people buy the newest, sleekest car on the market, they do not just care about the smooth ride or new sound system. Instead, they want the love and respect that is shown to the car's owner in its commercial. Upon purchase, this might happen for a day or two but eventually it will wear off. Once this feeling wears off, the consumer will begin to look for the next item that will give them momentary attention and surface-level love. Consumerism is beneficial to businesses because consumers are never fully satisfied with an item so they do not commit to it. Most people are not happy with the almost new version of something. Instead, they desire to get rid of it and move on to the newest version.

As long as individuals continue to want and pursue commodities, and search for deeper fulfillment, there will always be an element of scarcity in our economy. Economics is the study of the allocation of resources under conditions of scarcity. Scarcity implies that goods are consumed privately and not held in common.<sup>43</sup> Political

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<sup>42</sup> Espejo, *Consumerism*, 79.

<sup>43</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 90.

leaders sometimes commend consumption as the solution to the suffering of the poor in America. The leaders say that consuming will get the economy moving and thus open up more jobs. President George W. Bush even urged the country after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 to shop as the best way to help the country. The emphasis is placed on gaining private goods through individual consumption. Buying privately may help the economy within the United States but our consumption can have negative effects on other people. The United States is in a position of entitlement as we have access to anything we want, in addition to the things we need to survive such as food and water. Our consumption affects the ability of people in other countries to have enough food for proper nutrition and we do not even realize it.<sup>44</sup> The global food system is very complex and because we are disconnected from the roots of the products we buy, the topic of chapter four, we do not often think about the effect that our individual consumption has on people around the globe.

In America there is definitely an emphasis on private goods and ownership, which is a different approach than what was lived out by the Early Christian Church. Acts 2:44-45 explains their life approach as, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.” This theme is continued in Acts 4:32, “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.” The Early Church knew the importance of spiritual unity and they expressed this unity through communal living and sharing with those who were in need.<sup>45</sup> Providing for

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<sup>44</sup> E.M. Young, *Food and Development*, (New York, New York: Routledge, 2012), 21.

<sup>45</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, “Acts” in *Luke–Acts*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised Edition, edited by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 759.

the community and being part of the unified group were more valued than individual consumption. Christians are called to love their neighbors, which is very difficult to do when we are so focused on our own desires. Although it is difficult to turn away from our selfish desires, there are wonderful results that come from caring for others before ourselves. Acts 4:34 states that, “There was not a needy person among them,” because wealthy people gave what they had to the apostles and it was distributed among the needy. The lifestyle of the Early Church brought wonderful results because they consumed what they needed and shared what they did not, so that no one was in need.

Few Christians truly embody this style of living today, but we are still called to give to those in need. This is different than consumerism that encourages us to keep things for ourselves and possess as much as we can. The eighth commandment is given in Exodus 20:15 as, “You shall not steal” which indicates possession of something by someone. I grew up thinking this refers to stealing an object from another person. This commandment recognizes that God owns all of creation and everything we have is from God. We are not to steal anything that God has given to another person.<sup>46</sup> Psalm 24:1 states that, “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein,” offering the possibility that humans may steal from God. Malachi 3 includes a section on robbing God and explains how that is done in verse 8 by saying, “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.” God asks for tithes and if a person does not give the full tithe then that person is robbing God.

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<sup>46</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, “Exodus” in *Genesis–Leviticus*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised Edition, edited by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), 483.

In Acts 5:1-11, we read the story of Ananias and Sapphira who kept back some of the proceeds of the land they sold for themselves instead of setting it at the feet of the apostles. Ananias and Sapphira were likely killed because they lied and claimed they had given all of the proceeds from their land to the apostles when they had actually kept some back for themselves. Acts 2:45 says that members of the Early Church gave individual possessions to the community to be dispersed among the needy. The fact that the couple lied to keep a portion for themselves indicates a preference for their selfish desires over caring for the community needs. This offers a third possibility of stealing, which is to keep for oneself what one should give to others. I do not think that a large percentage of Christians will admit they have stolen in the first sense, that is to take something owned by someone. However, most will probably admit to keeping an unneeded item for oneself instead of giving it to someone who truly does need the item. We do not live in the same way as the Early Church in Acts but we can still remember to give to anyone who is in true need instead of giving into the desires that advertisers create in us for things we think we need.

As previously mentioned, advertising does not just affect what we buy but how we buy it. Because advertisers promise love and happiness to consumers, even though the product they are selling does not necessarily deliver those emotions, consumers are often left disappointed. This is a good thing for advertisers and businesses because it means they can sell the person their new product. Because products do not fulfill the promises made by advertisements, consumers are always looking for the next thing to make them happy. This translates into how we function as people and believers. We get excited about new things but they do not live up to our expectations so we lose our

commitment to them and move onto the next thing. I have started many devotionals with great enthusiasm only to get tired of it after a few weeks and look for a new one that will get me excited again. Community is a buzzword within the Christian church today with so many congregations promising community and saying things like “Find Community Here.” That seems great until the new visitor runs into the conflict that inevitably shows up in community and they are ready to move onto the next place where they will feel welcomed and loved without messy interpersonal complications. True Christianity cannot be a fad but is a lifetime commitment. Paul expresses how it is necessary to be in it for the long haul in 2 Timothy 4:7, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

One reason commitment is a struggle today is because we view things in terms of what they can do for us. As consumers, we value a product for the happiness or pride it gives us but when that feeling goes away then we look for a new object to bring that feeling back. As Christians, when the feeling of novelty wears off after entering a new church, study group or devotion then the desire to move on to a new place is there. If we no longer feel growth because of a preacher’s sermons or a teacher’s lessons then we look for a new place to grow. As members of the body of Christ, it is important to discern our individual gifts and use them for the betterment of the whole body. It is counter cultural to focus on our church and what we can contribute to it rather than focusing on what we are getting from the church. Parker Palmer writes about the importance of staying at the table, referring to the symbolic table of the Lord’s Supper,

even when times are hard and there is conflict. The growth that occurs in these hard times is much greater than what happens when people move on to other new tables.<sup>47</sup>

Advertisers work to create a desire in people for something they never knew was needed but most people are not aware of the object of their true desire. Augustine famously said, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>48</sup> Just as we get our value from God because we are made in his image, we also long to be in his presence and get true fulfillment and rest when we know God. Because of the Fall when humans were separated from God due to sin, we can experience a measure of contentment but will never truly be satisfied in this life. If we try to replace the relationship that God offers to us with idols of any kind then we will always be disappointed. Idols of money and material objects, which are very common today, might give us the temporary satisfaction of happiness but that will never last. Our desire for God may seem to fade because the ways we pursue God are imperfect and unsatisfying. However, commitment to a relationship with God is the only way to find true love and joy because those things come from God as our creator.

Another Christian author who writes about the fulfillment of our desires is C.S. Lewis. He said that, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>49</sup> Psalm 16:11 supports this by proclaiming to God, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” The

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<sup>47</sup> Parker J. Palmer, “On Staying at the Table: A Spirituality of Community,” *The College Experience* (Canton, Ohio: Malone University, 2012), 117.

<sup>48</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine Confessions*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>49</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 106.

other world is the Kingdom of God and only there in his presence are we as humans truly fulfilled. This promise of eternal life brings great hope for Christians but it also raises the question of how we are to live in this world. Advertisers attempt to convince us to transfer this desire for God to material items and consume those endlessly because they will never be able to adequately fill that hole. For the present, we must take Paul's advice in Philippians 4:11-13, "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need." We can live in this world by keeping our focus on God and being content with the material items we have.

Keeping our focus on God is easier said than done when we have so many different things pulling at our attention. Consumer culture calls us to visit malls, sports stadiums and websites so we can consume and fulfill our desires. James K.A. Smith explains how liturgies form our desires. He is not using liturgy to refer to a specific style of worship but to "rituals of ultimate concern that are formative of our identity—they both reflect what matters to us and shape what matters to us."<sup>50</sup> Smith uses the illustration of a shopping mall to explain liturgies of consumer culture. We are evangelized by their billboards, telling us that we will find happiness there. We then go, shop, and experience the cultural site of the mall. Then eventually we go home, the thrill of the experience fades and we pick up the list of everyday chores we must accomplish.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 93.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 99.

The liturgy or practice of going to the mall is formative for Americans as it shapes what we desire and how we fill those desires.

If as Christians we want to seek God to fulfill our desires, then we have to participate in liturgies that will focus our minds on God, instead of participating in the liturgies of consuming that are practiced at malls. Smith also writes, “Our ultimate love/desire is shaped by practices, not ideas that are merely communicated to us.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, if we listen to the messages of advertisers that create in us a desire for their product and act on those messages, we will begin to practice the liturgy of consumerism and never be fulfilled. However, if we participate in Christian liturgies then our practice of these liturgies will focus our desires on God. If we intentionally spend time in Christian liturgies then we will be formed by those practices instead of consumerist practices.

Richard J. Foster wrote a well-known book titled *Celebration of Disciplines* that outlines many ways Christians can discipline themselves to focus on God. We shape our ultimate desire through the practice of these disciplines. Foster writes about three categories of disciplines that are inward, outward and corporate. He explores twelve different disciplines such as prayer, solitude, service and worship. These disciplines are designed to refocus Christians by spending time alone with God, spending time with other believers, or spending time in the world. All of these disciplines focus on connecting to God on a deep level.<sup>53</sup> What we spend our time doing will be our focus so if we spend our time shopping and consuming then that will be our focus. However, if

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<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 27.

<sup>53</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Disciplines*. San Francisco, California: HarperCollins, 1998.

we are able to practice traditional disciplines like Foster suggests then we are able to focus on God and thus find ultimate fulfillment in God.

## “In Isolation from Others”

### Chapter 4

Advertisers constantly convince Americans of the need for more and more possessions, which has created a consumer culture. One reason for the incompatibility between Christianity and consumerist practices is the admonition to Christians against selfishness. In Philippians 2:3, Paul instructs us to, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” Consumerism focuses on the self and pursuing one’s own individual desires. The difficult aspect of consumerism is that people do not deliberately and selfishly choose to ignore the needs and lives of others.<sup>54</sup> The detachment between a customer and the products they buy isolates that customer from the producer and fellow consumers. We can hear stories through the news of poorly treated laborers in other countries but we do not know if those laborers made our clothes. It is easier on the conscience to assume our clothes were made by someone else. One can walk into a supermarket to pick up a box of cereal and not know the cereal’s ingredients, where it came from, how it was made, or who made it. Detachment has become the norm in consumerism. Since we get used to living in a detached and isolated world, we also tend to isolate ourselves from other people and our faith without realizing it.

Jesus teaches about the dangers of isolation in Luke 12:13 when a man asks Jesus how he should divide his inheritance with his brother. However, Jesus refuses to do so because he claims he has no right to judge over this matter because it is a question of

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<sup>54</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 36.

motivation.<sup>55</sup> Jesus then proceeds to tell the parable of the rich fool. The rich fool profited greatly from his fields and decided to build bigger barns to store all of his grains and goods. No one else is mentioned in this parable. He is clearly in isolation from others so his motivation is only to pleasure himself. “I” and “my” are repeated many times in these few verses to emphasize the man’s focus on saving to make his soul happy. Jesus condemns this man for laying up treasure for himself rather than being rich toward God. Jesus calls this man the rich fool in a time when the word fool was often used to refer to a person who rejects the knowledge and teachings of God as a basis for life.<sup>56</sup> That man was a fool for storing up goods to bring years of pleasure for himself but in America today, the parable would look a little bit different. Because consumerism is characterized by detachment, the man would not be hoarding up his profits but spending them. Today he would be considered a fool by Jesus because he is focused on spending money to continuously buy new things for his own pleasure instead of to honor God. It is typical today to discard items quickly and buy new instead of clinging to what we have.<sup>57</sup> The detachment that comes from lack of knowledge encourages consumers to buy new exciting things instead of keeping old things that we do not even remember from where they came.

When the industrial revolution occurred in the United States, production efficiency greatly increased. Because economic growth rarely occurs without a growth or change in culture, the way in which people consumed changed. There became a greater

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<sup>55</sup> Walter L. Liefeld and David W. Pao, “Luke” in *Luke-Acts*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised Edition, edited by Tremper Longmann III and David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 221.

<sup>56</sup> Liefeld, “Luke” in *Luke-Acts*, 222.

<sup>57</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 34.

number of products available, with the same number of people, so it became a social practice and even a responsibility to consume. Saving was no longer the right thing to do. Instead people needed to consume to support the new economy.<sup>58</sup> Many more items were made than ever before because they were made in factories instead of by individuals. Thus, a disconnect between people and items was created with this focus on buying new clothes, containers, décor and all other material items instead of saving these items.

Not only do Americans experience detachment because they are always consuming new things, but also because of their lack of knowledge about items. The globalization of our economy has allowed for commodities from around the world to be at our fingertips. We are able to walk into the American supermarket which typically has around forty-five thousand items available to us from all over the world.<sup>59</sup> We can eat an apple that was grown in New Zealand, 9,800 miles away, and not even realize it. Due to travel and production of food items, how we eat has some serious ecological implications in regard to sustainability and fossil fuels.<sup>60</sup> Produce is grown around the world and shipped to America so that we can pretend everything is always in season.

When the distance covered by food to reach our table does not detach us from it, the fact that we do not know what it is made of detaches us from the food. A large amount of the food that Americans consume regularly is highly processed. More than a quarter of the items in the supermarket include corn that has been manipulated in an

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<sup>58</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 19.

<sup>60</sup> Scott Waalkes, *The Fullness of Time in a Flat World: Globalization and the Liturgical Year*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 92.

infinite number of ways to get different flavors and textures.<sup>61</sup> Picking up a bottle of Coke, one does not typically think about the fact that it is sweetened by corn. Even my fruit snacks, which claim on the packaging to be made with real fruit, include multiple forms of corn in their ingredient list. Remaining detached from and ignorant of where our food comes from and what exactly it is made of is easy because industries do their best to hide their processes.

Robert Kenner directs the movie *Food Inc.* which explores the industrial food system of America and regularly has to say that a food processing company refused an interview. Companies do not want consumers to know about how the food is made because if they did, there is a good chance they would stop eating it. In addition to the effect on the actual food we consume, these industries also have a large ecological footprint that they would prefer to keep hidden. When asked about the effects of today's food system, Wendell Berry, who has been warning people about the dangers of our industrial society, said, "Ways of land use and ways of consumption are becoming more violent."<sup>62</sup> He continues on to explain that our society has not been able to produce in a way that is better for our environment and our bodies simply because we do not want to. The apathy from most people towards this issue comes from ignorance because they are detached and unaware of what the industries are doing. Berry continues to argue against industrial society because, "I know that there have been, and are, better ways of human life than the industrial way."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> David Kupfer, "Conversation: Wendell Berry," *Earth Island Journal* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 46.

<sup>63</sup> Kupfer, "Conversation: Wendell Berry," 46.

People in America used to grow their own food, make their own clothes, build their own houses and overall be able to provide for themselves. But today we buy things which cause us to be detached from the items themselves and our work. For people who still work to produce goods on a daily basis, labor has become dull. The assembly line was created and one person does the same thing day after day without ever seeing the end product.<sup>64</sup> Work no longer involves the creative process it used to, so work becomes about the pay check at the end of the week. Phrases such as “Hump Day” and “Thank God, it’s Friday,” indicate the desire of many to simply receive a paycheck and make it to the weekend. Capitalism was encouraged in the United States because of the Puritans’ belief that God called them to be devoted to their work and honor God in their labor.<sup>65</sup> But now for most people, work is just a means to achieve the end goal of the American Dream.

From personal experience, I know that awareness of the production process of an item helps to shorten the gap of detachment between the item and a consumer. When my family grew tomatoes at home, there was a much greater sense of satisfaction in eating them because we were aware of the work required to bring them to our table. I often question how decorative wall hangings can be so expensive, but after trying my hand at painting Cleveland Indian’s décor for Christmas presents, I begin to understand. Similarly, I never used to understand how store bought quilts and blankets could cost so much money. After watching my mother labor over a hand-made quilt for months on end, I begin to understand the long, intensive process. If a quilt is inexpensive then it is

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<sup>64</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 34.

<sup>65</sup> Wuthnow, *Rethinking Materialism*, 147

also probably cheap, in terms of quality and durability. Knowing where an item was made or grown and how it is produced can be difficult to discover. Local farmers markets are a way in which consumers can directly talk to producers and learn how their food is grown instead of buying food that is prepackaged in a grocery store from a faraway place. A complaint about local food or handmade things is often that it is too expensive. As we have become consumers and industrial eaters, we see things in terms of money. We reduce items to what they are worth monetarily and lose sight of what might be better for human health and the natural environment.

When we detach from products and how they are made, we also detach from the people who make them. The laborers who mass produce items for us to consume are invisible to us.<sup>66</sup> The quilt my mother made for my college dorm bed is invaluable to me while the polka dot blanket made in China, although soft, does not hold a lot of meaning. I have no idea how many people had a hand in producing it nor who any of them are. I feel no loyalty to buy another blanket from the same company or store because I have no connection to the producers. Fair trade markets ensure that their producers are treated fairly as compared to major industries but the items are still made by people from around the globe. It is hard to be committed to buying from the fair trade market, in which we know more of the story of how a product was made, because we still do not know who made it and thus are often unwilling to pay the more expensive price.

Consumer culture has taught us to take this practice of detachment from people and products hailing from around the world and apply it to the people we interact with daily. It is now rare for extended families to live together in America and single families

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<sup>66</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 43.

have replaced those extended family members with appliances. Fewer people in the home means less hands to help with cooking and cleaning so microwaves and dishwashers were purchased. Not only is the physical labor of the extended family replaced by a device, but more importantly the social support they offered is now gone.<sup>67</sup> As extended family members have been replaced by objects, those family members tend to be viewed as objects in terms of what can be gained from their relationships. The golden rule is to treat others as you would want to be treated with the emphasis on what you want from the other person. We reduce people to things and sometimes consume them in the same way we consume items. We detach from who they are and when we say why we love someone, we explain what it is we love about them. This list can often be reduced to the skills or traits they have that benefit us.<sup>68</sup>

The habits of consumerism that change our view of relationships through the lens of detachment also affect our relationships by changing the quality of time spent in those relationships. People get so focused on consuming items and working to earn money so that more consumption can happen, that they do not give time and energy to relationships that need time to grow. Instead of having relationships with other people, many are having substitute relationships with things.<sup>69</sup> For example, before consumer culture became American culture, a father and son might have gone out fishing at the local creek for their dinner. They would spend a lot of time together catching, cleaning, cooking, and eating their fish out by the creek. Today, it is much more likely for a father and son

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<sup>67</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, 8.

to pull a frozen fish dinner out of the freezer, microwave it and eat it in front of the television. First, they are completely detached from the form of fish on their plates compared to the fresh caught fish born and raised in the local creek. Also, the time spent together is a lot less meaningful and productive in strengthening their relationship. They spent more time connecting to the television than to each other.

Miller points out that as culture in the United States has changed, how we as humans meet our psychological and social needs has also changed. We attempt to fill these needs for meaning and belonging by consuming instead of how they were met in the past, through religion and community.<sup>70</sup> Instead of detaching through consumption, we need to attach to community and faith. Just as we are created to have a relationship with God, we are also created to be in relationship with other humans as first indicated by Genesis 2:18, “Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” This means that God would create a counterpart like the man mentally, physically and spiritually who also bore the image of God. The term helper here is not a marker of inferiority but means partners who would work towards the well-being of each other and who would work to glorify God.<sup>71</sup>

The Gospels of Mark and Luke describe how Jesus also recognized the importance of companionship, especially when going out into the mission field. In Mark 6:7, Jesus send out his disciples in pairs and also in Luke 10:1, “After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.” Jesus sent them out two by two to

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<sup>70</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 88.

<sup>71</sup> Stanley M. Horton, *The Old Testament Study Bible: Genesis*, The Complete Biblical Library, edited by Thoralf Gisbrant, (Springfield, Missouri: World Library Press, 1994), 31.

provide companionship, protection and a second witness while they traveled.<sup>72</sup> Jesus sending out pairs was just the beginning as the importance of community within the church is written about many times by Paul.

All believers are called to be part of the church which is many members united as the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses this metaphor of a body to establish the diversity of people within the church, just as each body part is diverse, but also to affirm that all of these diverse people must be unified because they are interdependent upon one another.<sup>73</sup> We cannot be effective in fulfilling the Great Commission given by Jesus without uniting since each member has been blessed by God with different gifts. One Christian cannot do the work of spreading the Gospel about Jesus Christ alone. Instead, a vast community is needed to work and grow with. The church also needs emotional unity which Paul instructs in 1 Corinthians 12:26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” The body of Christ must support one another in all times.<sup>74</sup> We need to attach to the rich tradition of the Christian faith and to the church of today to find meaning in and be sustained by our faith.

Detachment can cause us to consume faith without knowing the whole story. Just as we pick and choose what to eat in the supermarket without knowing much about each item, we are likely to pick and choose the elements of the Christian faith that we like without knowing how they fit into the faith as a way of life. It is important to know the metanarrative of scripture and how it is the basic foundational story that helps us to

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<sup>72</sup> Liefeld, “Luke” in *Luke-Acts*, 192. The double witness is a principle from Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15.

<sup>73</sup> Verlyn D. Verbrugge, *Romans-Galatians*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised Edition, edited by Tremper Longmann III and David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), 366.

<sup>74</sup> Verbrugge, *Romans-Galatians*, 368.

understand the whole world and how we each fit into that story.<sup>75</sup> When we understand the Bible in this way, then we are more apt to live our lives with it as the overall defining message instead of just the parts that we like. It is easy to want the promise of eternal life in a heaven that is beyond anything we can imagine but hard to sacrifice our selfish desires to live as Jesus calls us in service to others. We cannot detach these parts of the faith from each other but they must all be understood as one story. When we consume food that we know a local farmer has spent hours upon hours growing, we feel a greater connection to that food and find more meaning in it compared to a mass produced, packaged food item. Similarly, the more we know and understand about the Christian faith, the greater an effect it has on our life as we try to live out of it rather than thinking of it every once in a while.

One way Christians can begin to understand the faith more is by studying the two thousand years of church history. The tradition of the church is very rich but many Christians today are even detaching from that as they tend to prefer nondenominational churches over what some may refer to as the baggage that comes with traditional denominations. Christians tend to pick and choose the parts of tradition they like.<sup>76</sup> For example, the imagery of a stained glass window can be powerful and moving and one will accept that but will distance themselves from the rigidity of the liturgical practices that occur in the church sanctuary. Two thousand years of church history should encourage believers and add to their depth and understanding of the faith, but many know very little about it. We detach from the symbols and teachings of the past and consume

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<sup>75</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 18.

<sup>76</sup> Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 84.

only what we think fits in our present lifestyle. Christians need to choose to define their lives by the story of Scripture that is continuing today as the mission of the Church is still being spread. This is in contrast to the Christians who agree to the parts of the faith that fit into their consumerist lifestyles and live out of consumerism, not the metanarrative of Scripture.

An important sacrament that encourages Christians to attach to Christ and to each other is communion. Unlike many of the items that we consume, the body and blood of Christ are not scarce commodities. Jesus said in John 6:35, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” Anyone can come to the table and there will always be enough. The manna that was given by God to the Israelites for food while they were wandering in the desert is mentioned several times in John 6. The manna was given only to the Israelites while Jesus offers himself as the Bread of Life to everyone who believes according to the will of the Father as written in John 6:40, “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life”. The manna sustained the Israelites as physical food for a short time, but Jesus will sustain forever.<sup>77</sup> As each Christian consumes the Lord’s Supper, he or she does not detach but becomes part of the body of Christ as read in John 6:56, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” A major theme in the Gospel of John is to remain or abide in Jesus as he is our Lord and Savior. Colossians 1:18 says that Jesus “is the head of the body, the church,” so partaking of the Lord’s Supper is not just a time for a Christian to attach to Jesus Christ but also a time to unite with other Christians who make up the body

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<sup>77</sup> Robert H. Mounce, “John” in *Luke-Acts*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised Edition, edited by Tremper Longmann III and David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 221.

of Christ.<sup>78</sup> Attachment to the community of faith can be initiated and symbolized through the sacrament of communion and lived out on a daily basis as Christians grow relationships with Christ and one another.

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<sup>78</sup> Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 95.

## Conclusion

America's consumer culture encourages people to assume certain habits and practices. These change how we think about and interact with products. They affect what we value and desire. Consuming material items and foods with the habits and practices discussed thus far in this thesis can be damaging. They become especially damaging when we apply the same practices to human relationships and faith. Before one can attempt to resist these damaging effects of consumerism, one must first have a solid understanding of consumerism.

Throughout this paper, the definition of consumerism has grown. In chapter one, consumerism was defined simply as high levels of consumption. I agree with this definition but it is incomplete. To understand consumerism, it is necessary to understand what causes these high levels of consumption. We adopt habits, practices and beliefs that encourage us to constantly consume. Humans must consume to survive. This need for consumption turns into consumerism when consuming becomes an absolute good. Consuming is a relative good because it is necessary for us to survive. However, we make it an absolute good when we believe consuming will bring us ultimate fulfillment. Consumable items can bring happiness and joy, but only temporarily. The happiness gained from a material item will eventually wear off, at which point the consumer will buy a new item to find happiness. This process is cyclical in nature and thus leads to the high levels of consumption that help to define consumerism.

Similarly, high levels of consumption can occur because of misplaced desires. Saint Augustine and C.S. Lewis both have famous quotations —cited in chapter three— that explain how ultimately humans desire God and we are fulfilled only in God.

Consumerism convinces us that we can fulfill our desires through consuming items.

Advertisers spend most of their time brainstorming how to convince consumers they need the item the advertisers are trying to sell. Consumption is about the whole process of buying an item. This includes dreaming about, researching and disposing of an item, in addition to the actual money exchange. We are encouraged by advertisers to desire new items and since we always fall somewhere on this timeline, we are constantly consuming. Even if we do not need anything, advertisers try to convince us otherwise and thus we fall into patterns of consumption without need. Consumerism is not defined by people satisfying actual needs but attempting to fulfill their desires. Because these material items will not ultimately fulfill, people continue to consume to excess in search of fulfillment.

Consumerism is not necessarily defined by detachment, but is definitely enabled by the detachment that is prominent in corporations in America today. There is no connection between consumers and the products they consume and the people who produce those products. When someone is gifted with a handmade item from someone they know well, they are likely to treasure that item for many years. But when we buy an item that was made half way around the world by people we have never met, we feel no connection to it. Thus, we tend to throw that item away and buy a new one without a second thought. Detachment also allows us to consume items without thinking about the effect our purchase has on other people or the environment. Buying clothes made halfway around the world means a lot of fuel was used to get the clothes to our store down the street. However, we tend not to think about that or the cheap labor that was used to make the shirt; we just buy it because it is inexpensive to us. And, the more

inexpensive things we can find to buy, then the more items we can afford to buy in totality. Detachment is not an individual practice but is a part of our whole economic system and definitely enables the high levels of consumption that define consumerism.

After critically compiling all of my research, I define consumerism as the practice of making consuming an absolute good and attempting to fill our desires through high levels of consumption. Consumerism is not just about buying in excess but is a set of habits, practices and beliefs that change how we function on a daily basis. This changes how we view ourselves and humanity in general. The quotation that I have used to structure this paper is, “The image of humanity maintained in a consumer society is that human beings naturally pursue their own individual desires in isolation from others.” Consumer society encourages us to consume at these high levels by telling us that it is the way we were made to function. As a Christian, I disagree with the messages of consumerism because I know that God created us different and for higher purposes.

I have rewritten this quotation to reflect what I believe to be true, “We were created by God in his image to naturally pursue relationship with God in a community of believers.” The quotation now explains how Christians are created to live and how we should attempt to live despite living in a consumer culture. Psalm 139:13–14 reminds us of how God created us, “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.” Each one of us was intentionally and uniquely created by God in his image. We are given value because we bear the image of God. Bearing that image comes with a responsibility to bear it well.

Consumerism tells us that we were naturally created to desire but never be fulfilled. However, the Bible tells another story. God shows over and over in the Old Testament that God is relational and created us as relational beings. Thus, God desires to be in relationship with us.<sup>79</sup> We can be ultimately fulfilled only by God. It is important to practice the discipline of contentment in this life or we will always want more since material items cannot fulfill us like God can. One needs to pursue God within a community of believers. The sins of this world can pull a believer down and convince them of lies like those of consumerism if that believer is not attached to a community that will support him or her. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The Roman Christians needed to live not according to the ways of the world around them but according to Scripture. In community, we also must renew our minds so that we do not live mindlessly in the lies of consumerism but live within the truth of God.

I have only started to highlight certain aspects of consumerism in this paper. One could go much deeper into the values and desires that consumerism encourages. I have attempted only to give a broad overview of the consumer culture that we live in and how it tells us to function differently than God does. Consumerism is a relatively new way of functioning compared to the one, true God who exists outside of time for all eternity. We need to pursue God instead of the things that advertisers and consumer culture are trying to convince us to pursue. The difficulty is that material items do bring some satisfaction,

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<sup>79</sup> God shows this by constantly pursuing the Israelites. God chose them to be the people of God and initiated a covenant with them. Although the Israelites continued to rebel, God continued offer grace if they would repent and restore the unique relationship they had with God. One example of God calling to the Israelites is Jeremiah 4:1.

so we can get caught up in feelings that they may bring. We must remember that God is eternal and brings ultimate satisfaction. We are called to live as John instructs in 1 John 2:15-17, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

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