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Is Consumerism Consuming Us?

Abstract

"Consumerism is the air we breathe. It is *the* controlling metaphor of our time."

Posting about where we find fulfillment from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/is-consumerism-consuming-us/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Is Consumerism Consuming Us?

 [inallthings.org /is-consumerism-consuming-us/](https://inallthings.org/is-consumerism-consuming-us/)

Howard Schaap

It was after a day of teaching, an hour commute, a rushed supper and carting kids to evening activities, and then a hard meeting about the funding of an outreach ministry. I wanted to do something to relieve stress, to do something for *me*.

So I went shopping.

I didn't buy a thirty-eighth pair of shoes. I didn't even go to the pseudo-sacred space of the mall. No, I went to the simple tin shed of a Fleet Farm, where I lingered among the wall of fishing lures and took down various rod and reel combos to feel their balance in my hand. I *almost* stumbled on a real steal, a Quantum combo that was on clearance but just 6 inches too long to be perfect. I finally settled on a shallow-diving fire tiger Rapala to replace one I'd lost just a few nights earlier.

I *needed* it.

And I *deserved* it.

Though we like to point fingers at certain genders, demographics, and businesses as the problem, consumerism affects us all. My weakness is fishing lures, yours may be cars, or swimming suits, or steakhouses, or housing updates, or music, or movies, or images, or . . .

Consumerism is the air we breathe. It is *the* controlling metaphor of our time. Famously, the U.S. makes up 5% of the world's population and consumes between 23-26% of its resources. We will be known as some variation of "The Age of Consumption," an ironic phrase, bringing to mind the way tuberculosis consumed its victims.

Consumed by consuming, that's us.

Yes, part of our nature is that, in these bodies, we require food to survive. But somehow that fact has come to be the operative metaphor of what it means to be human. Like any distortion of humanity, "consumer" as metaphor comes with a host of bad side effects.

1. We become dazzled by packaging, fixated on the glitzy glossy surface and misled about the true value of things. Many authors have written about how consumerism paradoxically does not result in a high value of material things—consumerism is not materialism. Rather, consumerism creates a kind of abstract relationship with things so that the things we buy can become a steady stream of stuff we can throw away. (For a surprisingly different vision of things, consider how things are valued in J.R.R. Tolkien's world. Hobbits are tempted to hoard but are ultimately curators of hearth and table and home and even things well-made.)
2. Being a good human means being a good shopper. Sure, there's a range of skills that are valued, from thrift shopping and coupon cutting to having exquisite tastes, but knowing what we like and how to get it are at the top of the list of consumer values. The research data to support this is the importance of Black Friday to the world economy.
3. The world becomes all about our choices. What could be more misleading to children than this?
4. Waste, proportional to how much we buy, is necessary. What's happening to our waste, despite a few horror stories about floating barges in the oceans, certainly remains the biggest "don't ask don't tell" and "too big to fail" aspects of our 21st Century lives.

But the scariest aspect of consumerism is its straight-up idolatry, its spiritual power. In buying a Rapala, I was seeking momentary fulfillment and completion. Yes, even Fleet Farm was a place to turn to for a sort of solace. My

shopping excursion was a religious experience, a seeker entering the tin shed for simple revival. I could have done something quite different, retreated to the lake to pray, for example, or just enjoy the palette of the sunset on the waters. Either of these actions would have displaced me and my “needs” from the consumerist temple rather than putting myself firmly in the middle of it.

So how do we change the metaphor? The easy answer is to flip the coin, to say that we shouldn’t only be consumers but also producers. This is true as far as it goes. Rather than buying canned tomatoes, we can grow some of our own. However, to shift from consumers to producers is to keep the same coin, to make production a necessary good and to require consumers of what we produce.

Much has been made of the fact that we should instead be “culture makers.” However, because “making” seems closely related to producing-consuming—even though it’s different—for the purpose of this article I want to emphasize slightly different human roles: tending and curating.

This is where creation can help us. When we plant a garden, creation does so much work for us—or, in the case of weeds, in spite of us—that it’s hard to mistake that we are not the stars of the show. The garden grows and we work in it, but we are tenders and weeders and cheerleaders and beneficiaries. I feel something similar in my role as a parent.

Or take the churches we’re a part of. What if we considered our churches to be rich traditions that it’s our job to tend or even curate? Thinking of the various churches we attend, each with unique treasures that we should come to value deeply, to set in the best light, and then to invite others to come in and experience in a way that changes them—this is very different than a consumption model in which church is about measurable numbers (like a church GNP) or “what I get out of it.”

“One does not live by bread alone,” Jesus cites in Matthew 4:4, perhaps the most challenging verse to consumerism in scripture, “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Different translations say, “No one *can* live by bread alone,” or “One *cannot* live by bread alone,” as if living on bread alone is not actually life.

That would explain why, in a world of consumption, we seem to be wasting away.

How might we wean ourselves, our brothers and sisters, our culture from the empty calories of consumerism to the truly filling, truly satisfying Bread of Life?