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Consumerism and the Church

Abstract

"Too easily, a church can become focused on what the people want and how the service looks, becoming driven by human, rather than heavenly, desires."

Posting about how consumerism can affect the church 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/consumerism-and-the-church/>

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Consumerism and the Church

 [inallthings.org /consumerism-and-the-church/](https://allthings.org/consumerism-and-the-church/)

Donald Roth

Growing up in Southern California in the late 90s and early 2000s, popular kids wore t-shirts branded with surf and skateboard companies, regardless of whether they engaged in those activities. At the same time, going to a Christian school, some kids had cool parents who would actually buy them “No Fear” shirts while others’ bought them “Fear Not” shirts or one of the other knock-off “Christian” versions of the popular brands. I confess to having had a few of both in my wardrobe at various times, and my mixed feelings about these sorts of Christian parody brands was one of my first experiences with a messy marriage of Christ and culture, the often confusing attempt to navigate Christian discipleship “in the world, but not of it.”

A church “in the world” must grapple with the dominant spirits of the age, yet still be “but not of it” by keeping the gospel from being swallowed up by those spirits. So, is the “Fear Not” shirt a good example of the former or the latter? In addressing consumerism, surely one of the dominant spirits of this age, can the church take up its modes and methods and use them against it? On the one hand, what’s wrong with putting a Bible verse on a t-shirt? On the other, what’s right about it? Whether you applaud these sorts of efforts or roll your eyes at them, they should provoke us to defend our gut reaction. If we find a particular expression to be problematic, the call to discernment that characterizes good discipleship should drive us to do more than write off “those Christians.” We should trace the through lines to push at exactly what is eating at us about the speck in our neighbor’s eye, so that we can search for the potential planks in our own. For those of you cringing at your own memory of some particularly problematic engagement with consumerism, what are some of those through lines, and what can we learn from them? Here are some things that I see.

Form Matters

In [You Are What You Love](#), James K.A. Smith argues that we miss something if we focus only on the message while neglecting the medium. Smith builds on the idea that everyone has a vision of the good life that guides them, arguing that this vision is reflected in the things that we make and that differing collective visions can be expressed as “cultural liturgies” in the practices and settings that surround us. The problem is that we do not usually consciously critically engage with things like the structure of the mall, and Smith argues that even the design of such spaces can have an affective impact on us, encouraging us to adopt the false gospel of fulfillment by consumption. In other words, as Roy Clouser and others have argued: nothing is neutral; nothing fails to push us, be it ever so slightly, toward or away from our Lord.

So how does a “Christian” shirt fit in here? It’s a particularly clear example of Christianity trying to adopt the medium of consumerism (namely branding) in service of the message of Christ. However, if the medium carries its own message, particularly one that appeals to us on an often unconscious level, we should be careful. One reason why a “Fear Not” shirt might seem a little cringe-worthy now is that it’s no longer a novel idea, in fact, with the bankruptcy of No Fear, it’s not even a culturally-relevant reference any more. Beyond concerns that wearing such a shirt might convey a message of an outdated gospel today, Smith is even more concerned with what the whole enterprise might do to the church, as consumerism is driven by novelty, and, for a church that views worship as a primarily performative exercise, novelty becomes a key attribute of sincerity, thus allowing consumerism an easy avenue to seduce and subvert God’s people.

Means Have Ends, and Ends Invite Means

Taking this further, the concern is that using the modes of consumerism can subtly shift the church off track toward a false gospel. It’s not a wholesale heresy, but instead a shifting of degrees that moves the focus from God and His glory to man-centered self-worship. Smith is highly critical of the idea of worship as a performative act, seeing it instead as something where God meets us and (re)forms us. However, when worship is performative, the drive for ^{1/2}

novelty quickly trains believers to seek out novelty. Soon, a church that fails to market itself adequately or fails to have a high quality band that's up on the latest worship songs will see its numbers start to drop off. Now it's about how the church can innovate to draw back in the numbers it needs to market itself as a thriving church, and ... see where we've gotten ourselves? It's becoming increasingly easy to talk about the church in the language of business, marketing, and, in short, consumerism. Too easily, a church can become focused on what the people want and how the service looks, becoming driven by human, rather than heavenly, desires.

Thomas Bergler warns of something similar to this in [The Juvenilization of American Christianity](#), where he chronicles the rise of youth ministries in American churches. Bergler argues that where churches separated out the youth from the rest of the body to worship with games, pizza, and an inspirational message, the youth were acculturated to seek these things in place of what took place in the worship service. Essentially, the attempt to be more culturally relevant to attract youth had the inverse effect of training those youths to be dissatisfied with the worship service they re-entered when they grew out of youth group. Taking Bergler and Smith together, one reason to be concerned about adopting the methods of consumerism is that it can have unintended consequences, cultivating in us a taste for something other than the worship we think we want.

The Gospel is Bigger

Perhaps you're not on board at this point. What if you want to wear a Bible verse on your shirt? Don't churches *have* to be concerned with numbers at some level? It might seem I'm reading too much into this, but, ultimately, the real problem with using "Christian" as a brand is that the gospel is so much more than that.

In [Jesus, Made in America](#), Stephen Nichols raises just this concern. It's reminiscent of a *South Park* episode where Eric Cartman hatches a plan to make a bunch of money by forming a Christian band; he cites the huge "built-in" audience for Christian music and says "All we have to do is cross out words like 'baby' and 'darling' and replace them with 'Jesus.'" While the show plays this up to its usual irreverent and obscene parody, the point illustrates Nichols' concern well: consumerism seeks to put people in a box and make them naïve and manipulable. That is nearly the opposite of what Christians should be. Further, the gospel is not about setting up artificial social boundaries on what Christians should (physically) look like and listen to; it is about breaking those boundaries down and going forth to all peoples in all nations.

Ultimately, I don't believe that my "Fear Not" shirt was a gross heresy or that all churches that vest themselves in some of the trappings of the modern age are on the fast track to hell; however, I do believe that we are too often accepting of the modes of the world around us without turning a critical eye to what message these modes implicitly carry. If we are to avoid naiveté and jealously cling to the true gospel, we must cultivate that awareness as an integral part of our discipleship.