

ISSUES IN THEOLOGY PAPER

THE CONSUMING FIRE:

HOW OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD HELPS SHAPE A RESPONSE TO CONSUMERISM

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MANY, many years ago lived an emperor, who thought so much of new clothes that he spent all his money in order to obtain them; his only ambition was to be always well dressed. He did not care for his soldiers, and the theatre did not amuse him; the only thing in fact, he thought anything of was to drive out and show a new suit of clothes.

Hans Christian Andersen¹

So begins the famous fable, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, in which this vain man purchases the best clothes in the world – clothes that purport to be invisible to the foolish, though which in fact do not exist at all. The Emperor and all his people, wanting to appear wise, are caught in this idiocy until finally a young child exclaims 'But he has nothing on at all!'

Somewhat akin to the little boy in that fable, the recently published *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough*,² has begun calling out that the Emperor of Consumerism has no clothes. These secular writers have rightly observed the failure of consumerism to deliver on its promises.

If, then, even these secular pundits can see that there are serious problems in consumerism, what more, if anything, might a truly *theological* response to consumerism, derived from our knowledge of God, be able to say?

¹ Hans Christian Andersen, *Complete Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales* (ed. Lily Owens; New York: Gramercy, 1993), 438.

² Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2005).

Part 1: Understanding Consumerism

‘Consumerism’ may be perceived through various lenses – including philosophical, ethical, economic and sociological ones – each of which highlight different aspects. Before turning to the theological perspective which this paper pursues, it is therefore helpful to briefly understand the historical and philosophical currents underlying modern consumerism.

Our focus is not on simple ‘materialism’,³ but consumerism,⁴ which has been described as an exaggerated and *privatized* form of materialism.⁵ As a working definition, consumerism has been helpfully defined in the following way:

‘Consumerism is that promise of happiness offered through material goods and services which *capitalizes on the pleasure of personal customer choice*.’⁶

While the essentials of consumerism build upon timeless anthropological truths, its distinctive modern-day composition is the result of the confluence of many factors. Historically, the rise of modernism and the advent of the industrial revolution created ideal foundations for contemporary consumerism to flourish.⁷ Socially and technically, this shift began the enormous surplus of production that fuelled unprecedented productivity and affluence.⁸ Intellectually, following Kant, the changes were accompanied

³ Materialism is here understood in the usual sense of ‘a tendency to prefer material possessions and physical comfort to spiritual values’ rather than the strictly philosophical definition of ‘the opinion that nothing exists but matter and its movements and modifications’. These definitions are those numbered ‘1’ and ‘2’ respectively under ‘materialism’ in *The Australian Oxford Dictionary* (ed. Bruce Moore; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999), 834.

⁴ Thus Craig Blomberg’s masterful development of a theology of possessions, while it informs this topic, does so only tangentially, for it is concerned with material possessions rather than the consumerist impulses *per se*. His conclusions, however (pages 241-46) warrant close reading. Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (NSBT 7; Leicester: Apollos, 1999).

⁵ John Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture* (Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1999), 11.

⁶ Benton, *Consumer Culture*, 13 [italics added].

⁷ See Craig M. Gay, ‘Sensualists Without Heart: Contemporary Consumerism in the Light of the Modern Project’, in *The Consuming Passion* (ed. Rodney Clapp; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 19-39.

⁸ One commentator observes that ‘unlimited consumer desire is a manifestation of the heretical ontology of “lack” at the heart of modernity’. Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 17-18.

by the elevation of autonomous human reason, and an optimism about humanity's potential for discovering and providing the good life.⁹ Culturally, the advent of television, with its basis in marketing and advertising enabled an unprecedented promulgation of the consumerist gospel. Then, with the more recent triumph of postmodernism over modernism, the way was paved for consumerism to blossom.¹⁰ Postmodernism builds upon the economic successes and intellectual foundations of modernity, yet protests against the epistemological optimism modernism espoused. Rather than utilising a universally applicable meta-narrative, post-modernism's epistemological pessimism encourages the individual to tell their own story, thereby placing the individual in the driver's seat for arbitrating happiness, meaning and satisfaction.¹¹

Together, these specific contemporary factors – the postmodern focus on individual voluntarism, advertising's active promotion of *discontent*, and the unprecedented affluence and excess of production available for the first world – make an important contribution for understanding consumerism.

Each of these historically-specific factors, however, draws upon a universal anthropological foundation – including the human need for belonging and identity, our quest for fulfilment, the simple pleasure of consuming goods and the egoism that is basic to humanity – to create a powerful consumerist impulse. However our knowledge of ourselves is most fruitfully gained through our knowledge of God (Calvin, *Inst.* I.i.2), making it appropriate to turn to consider Him now.

⁹ See D. Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997) for a detailed analysis.

¹⁰ Alan Storkey, 'Post-Modernism is Consumption', in *Christ and Consumerism* (ed. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 115.

¹¹ This does not mean that postmodernism fails to recognise the importance of 'collective identity'. However such communal aspects are validated only inasmuch as they find expression in an individual's appropriation of them.

Part 2: Understanding God

God in Fellowship

The first thing we will observe about the person of God is his tri-unity. The Bible presents the one God as three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in full and perfect fellowship with one another. This ontology of ‘divine mutual indwelling’ provides the foundation for all communities of relationship. The oneness of God is manifested in the mutual self-giving of each person of the Trinity, which provides the basis for complete harmony within the divine fellowship. Therefore, the will of the Father cannot be held in opposition to the will of the Son or the will of the Spirit (see John 5:19; 8:16, 28; 10:37-38; 14:10, 31; 15:26). Each person of the Trinity finds their identity in terms of their relations with the others. So, for example, the Father is not just ‘Father’ in some abstract sense, but is ‘the Father of the Son’. True being for God is not found in isolated autonomy but in terms of self-giving relationship.¹²

The implications of this foundational doctrine are deep. The radical individualism manifested in consumerism, runs in direct conflict with this divine community. While humans are never capable of such deeply intimate relationships with one another, the divine model provides the basis for humanity to form and participate in communities of care.¹³ The consumerist quest for finding and forming self-identity through individual choices designed to separate and distinguish the ‘self’ from the ‘other’ finds no basis in the God who created humans in his image and built them for relationship (Gen 1:27, 2:18).

¹² See Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1997), 83-96.

¹³ Beginning with a relationship with God himself. For a brief introduction to an anthropology that builds personhood upon a Trinitarian base, see Craig M. Gay’s final chapter, ‘Toward a Theology of Personhood’, in *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live As If God Doesn’t Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 271-301.

God the Creator

The opening picture of the Bible presents God, through his Word, as the Creator of the heavens and the earth and everything in them, highlighting the *goodness* of the created order (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). The picture climaxes with God's blessing of the man and woman with every good thing and his giving them an authority to rule (Gen 1:28-29). We here see God, as the creator, rightly ordering humanity's nature and purpose, and this ordering is *very* good (Gen 1:31)! Later, it is clarified that humanity – created in God's image – is to work the Garden and take care of it (Gen 2:15), enjoying the generous goodness of God, and living in obedience to his Word. This good picture is the vital antidote to an overly negative view of the material world. At its most basic level, consumption is not only permissible, it is *good*. At its best, consumption is nothing less than an act of worship, for it recognises humanity's place as a creature in God's good creation, dependant on God's provision for sustenance.

Yet it is not up to the creatures to determine what is good for them.¹⁴ Rather, God alone, though his mediatorial Word, is able to prescribe his good purposes for humanity in the world.

God the Redeemer

As Calvin observes, we see God as Redeemer preeminently in Jesus Christ (Calvin, *Inst.* II.xvi.1).

The need for Christ's coming as Redeemer can be traced back to the tragic 'consuming' of the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3. Eve's choice to value the serpent's deceitful words and the goodness of the fruit (Gen 3:6) more highly than obedience to the explicit word of God, amounted to her choosing to self-legislate according to her voluntarily chosen purposes. The modernist belief in autonomous human reason and the postmodern

¹⁴ See Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd ed.; Leicester: Apollos, 1994), 52.

assertion of the individual's right to choose both find their archetype here in the Garden. From Genesis 3 on, God's abundant provision is used in direct contradiction to his spoken word, and the goodness of the fellowship between humanity and God is broken. Enter Christ, Immanuel ('God with us'; Matt 1:23).

His *Incarnation* means that the one man, Jesus, was both fully God and fully Man, with neither division nor confusion of the two natures.¹⁵ This re-affirms the goodness of the physical creation in God's purposes, and begins the reconciliation of humanity to God *within* the single united person of the Son.¹⁶

At the *Cross*, God is supremely revealed as one prepared to give his life for his enemies, for those who rightly deserved his wrath. The decisive redemption won at the Cross means that those who have been so bought are a new creation. Humanity's estrangement from God and one another that resulted from the Fall has been conclusively overturned. The Cross takes the mutual giving eternally present within the Godhead and applies it definitively to us in the gracious offer of free reconciliation. God's Sovereign activity takes us and reconciles us, not by our choosing, but by His.¹⁷ The atonement crushes our pretensions to autonomy and replaces them with God's gracious restoration of relationship that both emboldens and humbles us.

Further, Jesus' bodily *Resurrection*, introduces several vital truths. Firstly, we see that God's purposes for eternity integrally include physicality. The bodily Resurrection means that the created order doesn't need to be overturned but redeemed. Secondly, we are freed to enjoy a new hope which transcends the brokenness and limitations of this age. Thirdly, we see Jesus appointed as the judge of all men, giving meaning to our activities now. Fourthly, we see Jesus as the exalted head over the renewed people of God, providing a new corporate identity centred on Christ.

¹⁵ cf. the Athanasian creed.

¹⁶ See Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* (trans. Archibald Robinson; 2nd ed.; London: Nutt, 1891), §§1-19.

¹⁷ It is an Arminian error that grounds our salvation in human voluntarism.

God the Comforter

God is not only creator and redeemer, but dwells in his people by his Spirit. The Spirit, says Calvin, is ‘the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself’ (Calvin, *Inst.* III.i.1 [Battles]). This Spirit-based union with Christ that the believer enjoys is the basis of his or her new identity within the chosen people of God. Thus, God is not distant from his people, but present and united to them in a real and ongoing way.

Christians now, by God’s activity for them, enjoy every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph 1:3). Further, the Spirit is called the deposit guaranteeing the Christian’s inheritance (Eph 1:14). The union with Christ that Christians enjoy by the indwelling Spirit, means that we too truly participate in the fellowship of God. The futile consumerist quest for contentment does not find its resolution in merely swapping ‘base commodities’ for a little more of the commodity of ‘time’.¹⁸ Rather, it finds its proper solution in this generous indwelling of God, through which the believer finds contentment and is invited to generosity by the superabundance of this greatest gift.

Part 3: Conclusions

The several threads that have been woven above may be drawn together into a concluding tapestry. Four central pictures warrant comment.

1. Rebuilding a Dysfunctional Community

The biblical presentation of the divine community of three-in-one presents a sharp critique to the commercialization of relationships developed through consumerism. The divine economy is more interested love – namely giving and spending the self for the other.

¹⁸ This is essentially the solution of Hamilton and Dennis, *Affluenza*. See especially pages 153-77.

Community lies at the heart of creation. Do our churches, our workplaces and our homes reflect more closely the mutually-giving community of God or the individualism of Western solipsism?¹⁹

2. *Refocusing a Distorted Eschatology*

The materialism underlying consumerism is both affirmed and abolished by our picture of God. Creation is good, and indeed consumption may be good²⁰; but that goodness finds its place in the plans and purposes of God. The bodily resurrection of Jesus points us to acknowledge that the age to come remains a truly physical reality, and yet also that this broken world desperately needs renewal.

Consumerism's inability to see beyond the present reality leads it to a distorted view of 'the good life'.²¹ Our true nature and purpose are to be found in relationship with and submission to the God who made us. Our lives now are meaningful, because God, the *consuming* fire (Heb 12:28-29), will call them to account.

3. *Rebuking an Idolatrous Egocentrism*

Fundamental to consumerist thinking is the view seeing freedom as individual choice and private life,²² in which I, the individual, determine what is of value and what is right.

This deification of consumer choice displaces God from the central place that rightly belongs to him. True freedom is found in living according to our nature and purpose, as

¹⁹ Craig Bartholomew observes: 'there is a fine line between being relevant and losing integrity, and in order to have successful "ministries" many churches too easily start packaging the gospel as a powerful product for consumers.' Craig Bartholomew, 'Consuming God's Word: Biblical Interpretation and Consumerism', in *Christ and Consumerism* (ed. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2000).

²⁰ God's desire for our enjoyment of his good provision must nuance any critique offered. We enjoy the material *benefits* of consumerism every day. Much of the potential goodness of *materialism*, however, does not apply to consumerism. See Arthur Simon, *How Much is Enough: Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 101-03.

²¹ Indeed, some of the ecological damage in our world today may be attributed to the failure of consumerism to see things teleologically, even *within* the limits of this present order.

²² Craig Bartholomew, 'Christ and Consumerism: An Introduction', in *Christ and Consumerism* (ed. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 8.

determined by God the creator. True identity is found not in autonomy, but in Christ. Consumerism and Christianity both value personal freedom: their disagreement concerns the nature and boundaries of choice.²³ The eudaimonian project is doomed to fail, for God, not happiness, is the arbiter of truth.²⁴

4. *Replacing a Discontented Heart*

The fundamental paradox of consumerism is that it is fueled by abundance yet driven by scarcity. The disparity arises from a discontented heart searching for satisfaction in the creation rather than the creator. To see consumerism as an expression of simple greed is to misconstrue it. While its insatiable hunger for novelty and for acquisition often manifests as greed, consumerism fundamentally derives from, and feeds, discontent.

The biblical vision of God drives us to contentment and generosity. God has promised to provide for his children's needs, and calls his people to seek first His kingdom and righteousness (Matt 6:31-33).

Christian contentment draws upon God's person and work.²⁵ God has given us every spiritual blessing in Christ, and his indwelling Spirit is the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance in eternity. Having learned from Christ the pattern we should follow, Christians are freed to be givers rather than buyers, and Christ-like rather than consumers²⁶ – to live the contented life that both subverts the slavery to consume and promotes the true freedom to be found in Christ.

²³ Benton, *Consumer Culture*, 97.

²⁴ As Luther wrote, 'a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour. Otherwise he is not a Christian.' Martin Luther, 'The Freedom of a Christian' in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (ed. John Dillenberger; Garden City: New York: Anchor, 1961 [1520]), 80.

²⁵ See Brian Rosner, *Beyond Greed*. (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2004), 91-94.

²⁶ Benton, *Consumer Culture*, 60.

Like the fabled Emperor, our society's trust in the promises of consumerism leave us unclothed. Our task, however, is much more than to tell the world about its nakedness. Rather, we would do well to meet those relying on these vain garments with the more suitable attire of sackcloth and ashes, or, better still, with the new clothing of the imputed righteousness of Christ, that will endure both for this age and into eternity!

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