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The Cult of Comfort

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GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

THE CULT OF COMFORT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

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**GEORGE FOX
EVANGELICAL SEMINARY**

DEDICATION

I suppose I should dedicate this paper to my God and Savior Jesus Christ, but that seems so cliché. It would be the obvious choice to dedicate it to my wonderful wife Tammy for listening to my endless rants, supporting and encouraging me despite the time investment and financial expenditure, and to my children Remington and Rebekah because they are simply awesome, but that would be so typical. I really should dedicate it to my beloved hunting dog, Boone, which I lost before being able to rectify the fact that I chose not to take him out to beat the bushes for pheasant or to retrieve ducks for me during the two years I was working on this project, but that would be downright silly. Even so, I do, in each case. Furthermore, I dedicate this work to all those who have personally inspired, challenged, encouraged, nurtured and shaped me for these thirty-six years. This is the fruit of all of our labors. Thank you!

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ABSTRACT

The tension in which we find ourselves when it comes to the accumulation of wealth and material possessions is a common one for Christians in the United States. This is a natural result of living in a culture that is driven by the pursuit of comfort. It is aggravated by the fact that so many of our tendencies when it comes to money, happiness, and success are conditioned by the world instead of being shaped by the Word of God. We strive for worldly kingship, but we are called to otherworldly kingdom participation. We pursue comfort as defined by our culture, but the only way we can truly follow Christ is to give up our fixation on material comforts and become vulnerable to added sorrow and suffering by embracing the cross. Though we tend toward the cult of comfort, we must continually strive for Christ-likeness through sacrifice in order to fulfill our potential as Christians. Only by pursuing sacrificial living ahead of comfortable living can Christians and churches in the United States successfully participate in "kingdom come." Chapter one introduces this subject.

Chapter two looks at how embracing a culture of consumerism diverts the energy and resources of the Church. Chapter three focuses on how the pursuit of comfort drives people towards an escapist mentality that, in Christians, displaces the motivation to enlarge the kingdom of God. Chapter four discusses the cultural egocentricity of the United States and how this myopia prevents Christians here from truly serving the world as God's blessings have suited us to do. Chapter five points out how an aversion to suffering short-circuits the ability of the Church to stand as a sacrificial model of God's

love. Finally, chapter six offers conclusions and some practical ideas for reorienting one's personal life and church life in such a way as to trade a comfort-driven mindset for a kingdom-driven one.

CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM: DESCRIBING THE COMFORT-DRIVEN MENTALITY

“I am really conflicted!” John sat on the couch across the living room from me. “I do not know if you can help, Pastor, but I had to talk to someone.”

John was a committed church member, representative of hundreds of church people I have encountered over twelve years of local-church ministry. I knew John from the community, although he did not attend my church. Perhaps this was the reason he felt safe discussing these topics with me.

John was fairly successful at work, earning an income that provided for all of his family’s needs and many of their wants. Despite his relative youth (he was in his thirties), John was respected in his church for his loyalty, level of commitment, and generosity. Yet John was coming to me to talk about what at first glance appeared to be financial issues.

“I have a good job,” John continued. “You know that. I earn a fair wage and I should be getting ahead financially, but instead we are falling behind. I am frustrated because I believe we are following our church’s teachings on obedient giving; we tithe and even give over and above our tithe to special needs. However, it seems we are never giving enough. Our church is in its third stewardship campaign in five years. The church leadership has decided we need to keep adding on to the sanctuary, while it appears to me that we are doing less and less for anyone in need. I do not think this really matches up to

what Jesus models for us and calls us to in the gospels. We throw around the cliché, ‘Build it and they will come,’ but it feels like we are simply serving our own selfish and greedy mentality of ‘Bigger is better!’ I do not see us carrying out consistent ministry to the poor, needy, oppressed, and lost people in the community and world around us. Despite our full kitchen, gymnasium, decked-out youth corridor, and chandeliers, most of the people I talk to at church complain about the fact that we never seem to do anything together, much less do we open our facility to be used by the community as an outreach tool to the extent that we could and should.”

John went on without pausing, “It does not stop there. I feel like I am fighting a losing battle at home. We have so much junk, I cannot pull any of the cars into the garage anymore—and we have a three-car garage! My kids think I am a monster because I am constantly ranting and raving about the bills, but the spending never stops! Our walk-in closet has not been walked in for years, and the kids have every toy and gadget and designer shoe known to humankind littering the floors of their rooms. They tell me I should buy them laptop computers so they can sell their stuff on Ebay! My wife’s solution is to suggest that maybe it is time to look into buying a bigger house!”

He paused and looked up at me. “You have been to our house, Pastor. We have plenty of room. Hailey will be off to college in two years, and Edison is right behind her. What is the point in super-sizing the house when half of the children are headed out the door? What is the point in accumulating more when we are selfish and wasteful with the resources God has already given us? To make it all worse, now I feel the same way at church as I do at home. I am not sure this is the purpose for my life as a Christian, or for the life of my church. I think this focus on our own expansion and beautification in order

to comfort and please ourselves is really distracting us from the heart of Christian living and church life.”

As I talked further with John, I was impressed by his take on the church and his honest look at his own life. He had a sense that Christ had called him to more than financial gain. John was frustrated by what he termed “subversion of his resources” from what he believed was God’s reason for blessing his life.

“I know the parable of the talents,” said John. “I have always felt like God has given me more than my fair share. By the same token, I have wanted to be the model disciple, investing and even risking my resources for the sake of Christ. I would love to give more money to support real needs and see people with genuine needs impacted in Jesus’ name. I had an awesome experience on a short-term missions project in South America when I was in college. I cannot seem to get those children we worked with out of my mind. How are they doing? How is their church doing? How could I help the indigenous missionaries who were living such a sacrificial lifestyle continue to do God’s work among those so destitute? I have often thought it would be great if my whole family could invest two weeks of our vacation every year to serve someplace like that. Instead, I feel like I am spoiling myself and my family rotten while my church makes me feel guilty that I am not paying more towards buying bricks, paying light bills, and increasing the salary of a man I see talking a lot every week from the pulpit and sitting behind a desk, but doing nothing to lead any of us towards building the kingdom of God!”

John was struggling with one of the pressures of life in a fallen world.

This conflict is defined by Dan Allender and Tremper Longman as being between

“...the three most important verbs of life: *be, do, have*.”¹ In reference to Genesis 1:28, they write, “We are to make, to shape, to own the world around us. In our culture we have learned to see contradictions between being, doing, and having. Too often we become what we do; or we define ourselves by what we own; or we make in order to possess.... Before the fall of humankind into sin, no contradictions existed between these actions.”²

The tension in which we find ourselves when it comes to the accumulation of wealth and material possessions is a common one for us as Christians living in the United States.³ This is a natural result of living in a culture that is driven by the pursuit of comfort. It is aggravated by the fact that so many of our tendencies when it comes to money, happiness, and success are conditioned by the world instead of shaped by the Word of God. We strive for worldly kingship, but we are called to otherworldly kingdom participation. We pursue comfort as defined by our culture when the only way we can truly follow Christ is to give up our fixation on material comforts and become vulnerable to added sorrow and suffering by embracing the cross. Though we tend towards the cult of comfort, we must continually strive for Christ-likeness through sacrifice in order to fulfill our potential as Christians.

The United States of America ranks among the richest nations in the world. In

¹Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III, *Intimate Allies* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), 75.

²Ibid.

³Originally I adopted a word already coined by my illustrious professor, Dr. Leonard Sweet, “USAmerica” and modified it to “USACHristian” and “USACHurch,” using them and their plural variations in the many places in my paper such as this one. My use of these words was for the purpose of succinct identification, so as not to misrepresent persons or cultures of whom I have little or no knowledge. In order to maintain the high standards of academia, however, these references have been replaced with the repeated use of “in the United States,” “in this nation,” “in this country,” etc.

1999 alone, “there were 108,000,000 coffee consumers in the United States spending an approximated 9.2 billion dollars in the retail sector and 8.7 billion dollars in the foodservice sector every year.”⁴ Consider these additional statistics on consumption:

Globally, the 20% of the world’s people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures... More specifically, the richest fifth:

- Consume 45% of all meat and fish...
- Consume 58% of total energy...
- Have 74% of all telephone lines...
- Consume 84% of all paper...
- Own 87% of the world’s vehicle fleet...⁵

As members of a culture that daily gobbles down resources with seeming abandon, it is not easy or normal to turn our thoughts towards the needs of others.

In the winter of 2002, Hershey’s defined happiness with one of their TV commercials. A man suggests that happiness is eating a Hershey’s chocolate bar: He says something like, “It’s like getting a hug from someone you haven’t seen in a long time.” Then the commercial snaps to a square of a Hershey’s chocolate bar, engraved with an H, and the word Happiness appears. Immediately following the Hershey’s commercial on happiness was one describing comfort. It was a Mach 2 razor commercial and it said simply: “Mach 2. Total comfort!” Plenty of chocolate and a smooth shave (or having a man who has one) are concrete examples of comfort in this country. The pursuit of comfort and the pursuit of happiness go hand-in-hand in U.S. culture; together, they seem to describe the ‘American Dream’ today.

⁴SCAA 1999 Market Report, National Coffee Association, “Consumption in the United States” *Coffee Research*, available from <http://www.coffeeresearch.org/market/usa.htm>, accessed 25 August 2005.

⁵Anup Shah, “Behind Consumption and Consumerism,” *Global Issues*, available from <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption.asp>, accessed 29 August 2005.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that Christians and churches in the United States need to consider the possibility that we have become a cult of comfort, that our true purposes have been subverted by the allures of a comfort-driven lifestyle. It is my speculation that by pursuing comfortable living ahead of sacrificial living, Christians and churches adversely affect their ability to participate in “kingdom come” as Jesus prayed in Matthew chapter six.⁶ Perhaps this is what Jesus was alluding to when he warned in Luke 8:14, “The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.” As Leonard Sweet observes, “The Apostle Paul warned, ‘Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold.’ That word ‘world’ could be crossed out and ‘church’ or ‘family’ inserted without distorting Paul’s forewarning of life’s fossilizing forces. There are a variety of ways one can ‘run with the pack.’ The conformism of the church scene, and its repression of ‘alternative’ ways of being a Christian, can be a real show-stopper.”⁷

It is possible that one of the greatest needs of Christians in the United States is to adopt a sacrificial mindset, one that prompts us to work towards participating in the building of God’s kingdom as Jesus’ actions modeled and as his words propose in the gospels. I believe the Church in the United States must consider comparing our vision of the American Dream with another viewpoint, perhaps reflected in Ira Chaleff’s comments on struggle and discomfort: “Personal growth often involves emotional struggle. We should be prepared for that struggle and not try to shut it down at the first signs of

⁶Jesus made a point to emphasize the coming of the kingdom in his teachings. In the famous Lord’s Prayer, Jesus describes God’s heart, to bring heavenly things to pass on the earthly plane. If we are to pray for God’s kingdom to come, it follows that we are to be available to God to be a part of his plan of action for “kingdom come.”

⁷Leonard I. Sweet, “Be There,” (paper presented to Doctor of Ministry students at George Fox University, Portland, OR, 2002), 8.

discomfort. The knowledge that we may feel worse before we feel better is important and enables us to stick with the lessons we need to learn....If we shy away from discomfort, we will never grow. If we seek challenge, we will continuously grow, often in unexpected ways.”⁸

The pursuit of personal happiness and comfort describes the American Dream in our culture today. A snapshot of several primary areas of comfort might be arranged topically as follows:

Comfort to be found in the pursuit of security and safety.

Comfort to be found in the pursuit of wealth and possessions.

Comfort to be found in the pursuit of power and position.

Comfort to be found in the pursuit of an abundance of knowledge.

Comfort to be found in the pursuit of leisure activities.

Comfort to be found in the pursuit of gratifying relationships.

Comfort to be found in the pursuit of health and youth.

It is not my intent to deconstruct any of these goals or to suggest that comfort in itself is evil or unnecessary. It would also be beyond the scope of this paper to deal in depth with each of these areas of personal striving. Rather, I think it is important to question this cult of comfort, the endless pursuit of these goals in the hopes of finding lasting and true happiness. Unfortunately, in the fallen world in which we live, enduring comfort and happiness do not tend to be found in these pursuits. Benjamin Franklin would agree, I think, and did so when he cautioned, “...take care not to give too much for

⁸Ira Chaleff, *The Courageous Follower: Standing up to and for Our Leaders* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 1995), 39.

whistles.”⁹ Bruce Nicholls asserts, “In every culture there are elements that are sinful and lead to sorrow, as stated in paragraph 10 of the Lausanne Covenant, ‘Because man is God’s creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he has fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.’”¹⁰ By making the pursuit of self and its creature comforts a priority over the pursuit of the Creator, our consumer culture has tainted these aspects of creation, which otherwise hold so much promise for joy and fulfillment.

In our pursuit of security, we wall ourselves in and find ourselves isolated and lonely. In our pursuit of wealth and possessions we find ourselves gluttoned, buried under piles of “stuff,” and paranoid that others might be out to steal it from us. In our pursuit of power and position, we step on the fingers of others on the way up the ladder and find ourselves despised and fearful of the sure and unavoidable topple from the pinnacle. In our pursuit of knowledge, we grasp ever more fully our finitude. In our pursuit of leisure we find more stress, worrying about “what I should really be doing,” and “how I am going to pay for all of this.” In our pursuit of meaningful relationships, we find that no human relationship is ultimately fulfilling, or destroy the ones we do have in an attempt to deny this reality by experimenting with inappropriate relationships. And in our pursuit of health and youth, we deny the wisdom of the aged and the realities of illness, dying and death.

⁹Benjamin Franklin, “The Whistle,” in *The Oxford Book of American Essays*, ed. Brander Matthews (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1914), 4-6. Franklin tells a story of buying a whistle for four times its worth; his family laughed at home, and he regretted not using his money more wisely. He writes, “often, when I was tempted to buy some unnecessary thing, I said to myself, *Don’t give too much for the whistle*; and I saved my money.”

¹⁰Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture*, Outreach and Identity: Evangelical Theological Monographs, ed. Klaus Bockmuehl, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 15.

Is it possible that this cult of comfort has subverted the Church in the United States? This is an extremely important question, because it addresses the issue of lordship, of whom we will ultimately allow to be God in our lives. According to anthropologist Paul Hiebert, “...it is a small but dangerous step from self-centeredness to self-deification. Ever since the Garden of Eden, this has been the first and most fundamental of human sins. Satan did not tempt Adam and Eve to worship him but to worship themselves—their own freedom, their rights, their potential for becoming gods. Self-absorption, not demon possession, is the greatest danger in Western societies.”¹¹

Could it be that the “inalienable right” to the “pursuit of happiness” has pushed many Christians in this country, along with the rest of the culture, to the point of such deep self-centeredness that we cannot even see the obvious and ironic and inevitable outcomes? Life, liberty, and happiness are limited functions. Research has shown, for instance, that everyone dies. Those who claim to give the Bible authority over their lives can’t ignore the message that a life lived for self could be better described as spiritual death. Consider the punishment of the man and the woman in the Garden of Eden. Their one simple, selfish act brought misery and death into all of creation.¹² Such has been and will continue to be the result of every sinful action since.¹³ James warns of self-gratification:

¹Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. ²Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the

¹¹Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 244-45.

¹²Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-19.

¹³Romans 3:10-18, 5:12-21, 6:23, James 1:13-15.

last days. ⁴Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.¹⁴

Jesus' parables of self-serving people like the rich man who ignored the needs of the poor beggar Lazarus,¹⁵ and the rich fool who stockpiled his grain without regard for God¹⁶ are just two examples of Jesus' confrontation of the self-centered life. Jesus keeps it simple; the first will be last and the last will be first.¹⁷

Put another way, life on my own terms is the surest path to a deathlike existence; a selfish life leaves in its wake fragmented families, estranged spouses, traumatized children, bewildered employees of huge firms gone bankrupt, and out-and-out loneliness. Liberty on my own terms is a fast-paced run towards slavery. Selfish freedom burns all my co-workers as I deceive my way into a promotion; leaves thousands looking for a job in the wake of another one of my hostile corporate takeovers; creates more and more servants as I find there are more and more things I need not stoop to do for myself; brings about the untimely death of an unborn child because my actions seemed right and pleasurable at the time; takes away the freedom of others as I gain more of it for myself; and is like denying the pull of gravity as I walk off the roof of a ten-story building, ending with the same unfortunate results. The pursuit of happiness on my own terms brings discontent: garages full of bikes and roto-tillers and that push mower we planned to sell when we bought the riding mower and so on until there is not even room for my

¹⁴James 5:1-5.

¹⁵Luke 16:19-31.

¹⁶Luke 12:13-21.

¹⁷Matthew 19:30, 20:16, Mark 9:35, Mark 10:31, and Luke 13:30.

five cars; satellite companies marketing a hookup in every room in the house, which we need, of course, since there is at least one TV in every room of the house; rushing around every night of the week and every weekend taking kids to dance and band practice and karate and piano and soccer and creative aluminum-can-sculpturing classes and youth group and the fund-raisers for each, while we try to figure out how we are going to squeeze in the remodeling project, clean the pool, brush the dogs and llamas, finish the work that we brought home from the office, do the extra job we hold on the side, read the book Oprah will be discussing next Thursday, and find time to watch the season premieres of “CSI” and “Crossing Jordan” and “Survivor” and “The \$25 Million Hoax.”

Perhaps part of the problem is that too many people in the U.S. have begun to ignore the ALL in the pledge of allegiance. “...one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Our self-absorption has us so blinded that we cannot even see the slavery and injustice and discontent and death of others in which we are participating in the name of God’s blessed nation of freedom-seeking consumers.

Whatever the case may be, I believe the problems of a comfort-driven culture have boiled over into the Church in this country. By pursuing comfortable living ahead of sacrificial living, it is likely that Christians and churches have adversely affected their ability to participate in “kingdom come.”

How can we escape this greed for comfort and alleged happiness that can drag us away from a deep, meaningful existence, and keep us from taking part in the plan for which God has called us through redemption from slavery to sin and death? It is possible that the only way for us to shake off this cult of comfort will be to place true and deeply felt sacrifice in a position of prominence in our lives. We may have to displace our selfish

pursuits entirely by actively positioning ourselves for discomfort, sacrifice, and even suffering. There may be no other way to recapture the life of a close Christ-follower and move beyond superficiality into deep Christian experience.

This paper will address all these issues, from consumerism to escapism to cultural egocentrism to the avoidance of suffering, and how each impacts the kingdom effectiveness of the Church. Chapter two explores how embracing a culture of consumerism diverts the energy and resources of the Church in the United States. Chapter three focuses on how the pursuit of comfort drives Christians in the United States towards an escapist mentality that displaces the motivation we might have to enlarge the kingdom of God. Chapter four discusses the cultural egocentricity of the United States and how this myopic perspective prevents Christians here from truly serving the world as God's blessings have suited us to do. Chapter five points out how an aversion to suffering short-circuits the ability of the Church in this country to stand as a sacrificial model of God's love for the world and for God's people. Finally, chapter six offers some practical ideas for reorienting one's personal life and church life in such a way as to trade a comfort-driven mindset for a kingdom-driven one.

CHAPTER 2

THE SPOILED CHURCH: EFFECTS OF CONSUMERISM ON THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States of America is a culture of consumerism.¹ Rodney Clapp suggests, "What worries some people about consumption...is that the affluent, technologically advanced West seems more and more focused not on consuming to live but on living to consume."² For those who doubt the gravity of this issue, I defer to the economic and cultural experts, both secular and religious. Clapp cites, for example, Harvard historian of marketing Richard Tedlow, who refers to the United States as the premier "nation of consumers."³ For the purpose of this chapter, however, we will take the opening two statements as foundational premises.

The intention is not to deconstruct capitalism as a whole, or necessarily to point out all of its effects on the Church in the United States, for good or for ill. Capitalism is

¹"A consumer society is one in which the possession and use of an increasing number and variety of goods and services is the principal cultural aspiration and the surest perceived route to personal happiness, social status, and national success.

"A consumerist society makes the development of new consumer goods and the desire for them into a central dynamic of its socioeconomic life. An individual's self-respect and social esteem are strongly tied to this level of consumption relative to others in the society.

"...the things whose consumption characterizes a consumer society are not those that are needed for subsistence, but are 'valued for non-utilitarian reasons, such as status seeking, envy provocation, and novelty seeking.'" Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman, and David Kiron, eds. *The Consumer Society*, Vol. 2, *Frontier Issues in Economic Thought* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997), 2-3.

²Rodney Clapp, "The Theology of Consumption & the Consumption of Theology: Toward a Christian Response to Consumerism," in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 169.

³Ibid. See also James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation: the Triumph of American Materialism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 17-18, where Twitchell argues, "When the rest of the world wishes to disparage Americans, they call us a nation of consumers. And they are right."

not on trial, but rather its subordinate feature of consumerism. For this reason, a working definition of consumerism is necessary.

An overview of Scripture reveals examples of God's generosity: blessing through God's gift of creation to humanity;⁴ kings and royalty⁵ of utmost opulence who were favored by God; and even just "regular folks"⁶ who experienced material abundance as a direct result of God's hand in their lives. Evidently God is not opposed to the enjoyment of what the created, material universe has to offer, nor does it seem that God is opposed outright to individuals' amassing material wealth. On the other hand, Scripture reveals that God is disturbed by attitudes of over-attachment to material possessions and riches, and by the behaviors that ensue. Five of the Ten Commandments are arguably based on prohibitions of a materialistic nature.⁷ Sodom, albeit intrinsically evil in other more obvious ways, was destroyed for its arrogant and selfish disregard for the poor, as Ezekiel points out: "'Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. . . Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.'"⁸

John R. Schneider, in an attempt to set out what it is that God abhors in connection to humans and their material riches, writes:

Amos gives the clue to the essence of the evil. It is not the finery that Amos judges as evil, but the horrible hardness of the rulers toward the poor, even as they crushed them underfoot. As they ate, sang and danced

⁴Genesis 1:28-29.

⁵For example, Solomon (1 Kings 3:11-13) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:29-32).

⁶For example, Abraham (Gen 12:1-3, 14:21-23), Joseph (Gen 41:38-44), and Job (Job 42:12-17).

⁷Exodus 20:1-17: Putting anything before God, honoring the Sabbath rest, committing adultery, stealing, and coveting.

⁸Ezekiel 16:49-50.

on the battered bodies of widows and orphans, they celebrated their royal lineage and connections with the great King David. One thing they lacked, however. They did not “grieve the ruin of Joseph” (Amos 6:6).

If Amos is a good example, the prophets . . . condemn the rich . . . for falling to seductions of power and privilege.⁹

While it appears that Scripture allows for and even encourages mindful and thankful consumption of the incredible riches of God’s universe created both for human and divine enjoyment, it also appears that over-consumption without regard for an impoverished world is strongly opposed by God, and in fact is accompanied by the threat of extreme consequences. From this view of Scripture, it is easy to see how the cult of comfort, how making the accumulation of things in order to improve on a comfortable lifestyle a priority over a sacrificial lifestyle with the intent of helping others, would be upsetting to God. Such a disregard for others would adversely affect the ability of Christians and churches to participate in God’s intents and purposes for this world, in “kingdom come.”

“Consumerism” varies from “consumer” and “consumption” in that the latter two are inescapable realities of human life. Neva Goodwin quotes a leading ecological economist, Herman Daly, regarding the ‘necessary evil’ of consumption: “consumption is the disarrangement of matter, the using up of value added that inevitably occurs when we use goods. Consumption is the transformation of natural capital into manmade capital and ultimately to waste.”¹⁰ Even before the fall, the humans in the Garden of Eden were consumers. Tsvi Blanchard writes in his essay *After Eden*, “In the contemporary situation as well, consumption may also be seen in part as the expression of the systematic and

⁹John R. Schneider, “On New Things,” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 142.

¹⁰Goodwin, et al., *The Consumer Society*, 2.

ethically regulated interconnection of persons who are understood to be G-dlike by virtue of their ability to act freely on their choices. Stewardship in this context demands more than the ethical use of resources. It also requires the consumption of resources in ways that express the human ability to be G-dlike by enhancing human power, consciousness, freedom, relationship and will.”¹¹

Consumerism is consumption to the extreme. While consumption, according to Blanchard’s definition, is positive and necessary, consumerism is consumption gone wild. I would define consumerism as “the advancing consumption of resources beyond need without regard for the human ability to be creatively and responsibly Godlike.” As Clapp argues, “Consumerism names that ethos of the modern market that is at least as inescapable as the state. Thus, modern persons are increasingly defined in all our relationships or endeavors as consumers. We are no longer ‘students’ but ‘educational consumers,’ no longer ‘worshippers’ but ‘church shoppers,’ no longer ‘patients’ but ‘health consumers,’ and so on.”¹²

Consumerism drives the inherent human consumptive nature to the forefront, labeling it of inordinate importance, and compelling modern market societies and their constituents to give wants and implied needs constant thought and priority.¹³

¹¹Tsvi Blanchard, “After Eden: The Search for the Holy in a Consumer Society,” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 99.

¹²Clapp, *The Consuming Passion*, 8.

¹³Another helpful definition, by Leslie Sklair, is referenced by Goodwin et al: “...a culture-ideology of consumerism, defined as ‘a coherent set of practices, attitudes and values, based on advertising and the mass media but permeating the whole social structure, that encourages ever-expanding consumption of consumer goods’” (Leslie Sklair, “The Culture Ideology of Consumerism in the Third

While moderate consumption meets the needs of the consumer and is necessary and acceptable, consumerism parallels the behavior of a spoiled child,¹⁴ reflecting an addictive state¹⁵ of wanting more and more¹⁶ even to the point of wanting to want.¹⁷ Rodney Clapp remarks, "The problem with consumption, and the consumer capitalism that has pushed it to feverish historical extremes, is that it has become so all-consuming."¹⁸

Consumption results in temporary satisfaction of needs while consumerism stimulates discontentment and a heightened sense of need where there is none. Jackson Lears writes, "This was the dynamic of deprivation at the heart of expanding consumption: purchase brought momentary satisfaction, followed by dissatisfaction and

World and The Culture Ideology of Consumerism in Urban China," in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron [Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997], 320).

¹⁴"Satisfying our habits can create ever-increasing needs for goods, especially if each new activity quickly become habitual and expected; this is what it means to become spoiled." Tibor Scitovsky, "The Psychology and Economics of Motivation," in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997), 213. See also Philip Cushman's thoughts on a spoiled United States of America in *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: a Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 231-233.

¹⁵See Goodwin et al, *The Consumer Society*, pages 3, 160, 213, and 214 for comments on the addictiveness of consumption.

¹⁶"Globally, government policies undervalue renewable resources, ignore ecosystems, and underprice raw materials. Worst of all, such policy goals, based on the assumption that 'more is better,' misinterpret the ecological havoc of overconsumption as healthy growth" (David A. Crocker, "Consumption, Well-Being and Virtue" in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron [Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997], 14). Raymond Benton, Jr. describes the typical person's process of shopping: far from a rational search for information followed by a selection of the product that offers the greatest satisfaction, "the image that emerges is one in which people pursue income to buy more and more things to consume and, feeling dissatisfied but not quite sure why, set out after still more income and consumption" (Raymond Benton Jr., "Alternative Approaches to Consumer Behavior" in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron [Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997], 203).

¹⁷cf Craig M. Gay, "Sensualists Without Heart: Contemporary Consumerism in Light of the Modern Project" in *The Consuming Passion*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 28.

¹⁸Clapp, 169.

renewed longing.”¹⁹ Colin Campbell describes consumerism in this way: “actual consumption . . . is . . . likely to be a literally disillusioning experience, since real products cannot possibly supply the same quality of perfected pleasure as that which attends imaginatively enjoyed experiences.”²⁰ Clapp goes on to say: “So we modern consumers are perpetually dissatisfied. . . remember, the average American is exposed to more than 16,000 sales messages daily.... Insatiability itself is as old as humanity, or at least the fall of humanity. Unique to modern capitalism and consumerism are the idealization and constant encouragement of insatiability—the deification of dissatisfaction.”²¹

James B. Twitchell, while noting that the consumerism faced in the United States is primarily a result of people’s desire for things, refuses to deny its destructive nature when he writes:

By no means am I sanguine about such a material culture. It has many problems that I have glossed over. Consumerism is wasteful, it is devoid of otherworldly concerns, it lives for today and celebrates the body. It overindulges and spoils the young with impossible promises. It encourages recklessness, living beyond one’s means, gambling. Consumer culture is always new, always without a past. Like religion, which it has displaced, it afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. It is heedless of the truly poor who cannot gain access to the loop of meaningful information that is carried through its ceaseless exchanges. It is a one-dimensional world, a wafer-thin world, a world low on significance and high on glitz, a

¹⁹Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance* (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1994), 46.

²⁰Colin Campbell, “The Sociology of Consumption” in *Acknowledging Consumption*, ed. Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 1995), 118.

²¹*Ibid.*, 188. Rodney Clapp also suggests, “. . . the consumptive ethos is exceedingly complex—one often, but by no means always, supported by Christians. All its elements are not simply good or bad. It is pervasive in both grossly obvious and infinitely subtle ways. It is profoundly rooted in faith, culture and society as we now know them. To the degree it is toxic, it is an ivy in a garden with its tendrils wrapped around and through our most beautiful flowers and our most essential vegetables. It could not be violently or wholly extirpated without destroying much that we rightly prize and protect. But like just such a vining plant, it has grown too abundant and thick, so that it is now choking the life out of precious flowers and indispensable vegetables. Christians and other people of faith are among those who must gird themselves for a long, intricate and difficult pruning” (12).

world without yesterdays.²²

Consumerism is not merely a pattern of consumption, but rather a negative extreme that might be best described as the resulting behavior of simple, selfish, addictive greed,²³ which is historically one of the seven deadly sins.²⁴

Christian culture in this country tends to send a message that the United States Church is “set apart,” which suggests that somehow it is doing at least a moderate job of keeping the negative influences of the culture at bay. Despite the United States Church’s vocal opposition to abortion, pornography, and gay rights (from the right) or efforts to tear down walls of racism and other barriers (from the left), it seems that by and large the reality of life for professing Christians in this country is on par with their secular neighbors, as data in this chapter suggests.

Believers in the United States make the claim that they are indeed Christians; they certainly give mental assent to the divinity of Jesus, testify that a previously vacant space in their hearts is now filled with a sense of God’s presence (certainly God is welcome there), and they may even have momentary sensations of ethereal bliss (predominantly during worship services where their emotions are briefly aroused). However, lives given over to the kingdom imperative, to the true lordship of Christ (as echoed in lives lived primarily in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit, lives reflected in the mirror of

²²Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, 284.

²³Craig Gay quotes de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*: “I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest” (Gay, “Sensualists without Heart,” 22).

²⁴It would be interesting to examine the value profile of advertising and compare the extent to which it promotes the seven deadly sins of greed, lust, sloth, pride, envy, gluttony, and anger with its promotion of the seven cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance, courage, faith, hope, and love. Colin Campbell, “Modern Consumerism and Imaginative Hedonism” in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997), 238.

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God . . . ,”²⁵ lives “. . . transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory . . . ,”²⁶ lives walked as Jesus walked,²⁷) seem to be few and far between. Christians in this country become comfortable talking the talk, avoiding the more extreme evils of the culture around them (by their own personal definitions and rationalizations), to be sure, but walking the walk, truly shunning the most innocent and pervasive, negative elements of society is not a goal the Church in the United States can currently boast it is effectively reaching.

In fact, a whole generation or more of Christian children here have been raised in Sunday schools where passages such as the story of the rich young ruler are watered down with an explanation as follows: “Now, Jesus does not really want you to run out and sell everything you have and give the money to the poor. He just wants you to be willing to do that if he asks you to.” It is a nice gesture towards the truth, but in the end it really just teaches that Jesus does not mean what he says and that God will never actually ask us to experience discomfort. The cult of comfort deceives its adherents with wishful thinking, over-spiritualization, and under-application of the biblical principle of sacrificial living. United States Christians, especially Protestants, have a history and a habit of spiritualizing a faith that should encompass not only our spirits, but every aspect of our humanity, permeating our emotions, social interactions, intelligence, and of course our actions. We should not have to be reminded that faith without works is dead.²⁸

While giving assent to biblical values on a spiritual level, it seems that Christians

²⁵Matthew 6:33 KJV (King James Version).

²⁶2 Corinthians 3:18.

²⁷1 John 2:6.

²⁸James 2:14-26.

in the United States have embraced many aspects of the secular culture, deluding themselves by verbalizing a “separate from the world” approach to Christianity all the while living a mildly to profoundly worldly lifestyle outside the four walls of the church building.²⁹ This kind of self-deluding mindset and approach to personal living hurts the local church and, in doing so, it adversely affects the national Church, the global Church, and the historical Church. When Christians are “living beyond the kingdom” while away from the local church community, the worldly ways of their personal lives can come crashing in on the life of the local church. John White confesses on behalf of Christianity in the United States,

There is an uncanny similarity between our day and that of ancient Israel. God’s ancient people worshiped the Baalim: we worship a materialistic golden cow. At heart many of us have a greed for things. We have made the world’s agenda of status seeking our own. Unquestionably we have adopted the world’s techniques of gaining influence and security. And it has worked. We are flushed with success. We have made *Time* and *Newsweek*. Yet can we be sure that we are featured in national magazines for the best of reasons? Is it because of our godliness and our love for our neighbors, or is it because we have grown large enough to have political influence? Have we attracted society’s attention by reflecting the beauty of our Lord, or have we prostituted ourselves, being successfully peddled to the public by public relations experts?³⁰

Although this secular enculturation can take many negative forms, the specific focus of this chapter is to examine possible negative effects the consumer culture of the United States has had upon the current Church in this country, particularly with regard to how it may have prevented us from fully pursuing God’s mission for the church.

At the outset of my research, I believed I might find that some of the negative

²⁹John White, *The Golden Cow: Materialism in the Twentieth-Century Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 90-93.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 12-13.

effects of consumerism have infiltrated the Church in this country. However, what caught me unawares is that the converse also seems to be true. There was an overwhelming consensus that historically, the Church in the United States has actually been an active and substantial player in the developmental process of consumerism within our country.

James Twitchell, for example, makes the following observation:

What makes organized Christianity the appropriate precursor of modern materialism is that it does indeed trade a surplus product—redemption of some sort...—for the attention of a willing populace. The relief of audience anxiety, albeit created by the institution that resolves it, is effectuated by membership, and membership depends on contributions of some sort, be they made in coin or sweat. You contribute to the church, you receive comfort in return. *You* will be saved (others won't be). In the material world of capitalism the exchange is effectuated through things. Buy this. Be someone special. Advertising has been rightly called the church art of capitalism because it continuously reiterates this deep desire for meaning...³¹

T.J. Jackson Lears concisely lays out the historical connection between Christianity in this nation and the consumer cult of comfort when he states, “The Protestant ethic gave way to a therapeutic ethos in early twentieth-century America, but has persisted in a subtle, influential form, encouraging personal growth through the management of desire.”³² Rodney Clapp elaborates on this point:

Christians...have in some ways been avid architects of consumerism.... Thanks to this growing appetite for sensationalism and milder amusement, Moore notes, nineteenth-century Protestants played an important hand in a “revolution in reading that had a major impact on the development of consumer culture.” The commodification of religion produced a much greater number of books and “involved a basic shift in psychology, one that fed a habit of addictive buying....

As Weber and many others note, the mercantile way of life was not

³¹Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation*, 70-71. He includes this conversation between a minister and his local Coca-Cola bottler: “I see a strange connection between your slogan ‘The pause that refreshes,’ and Christ’s own words, ‘Come unto me, all ye that travail, and I will refresh you.’” (138).

³²T. J. Jackson Lears, “Introduction to Fables of Abundance” in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997), 251.

held in high esteem prior to the Reformation. ...For good and for ill, it is Luther and Calvin who laid the groundwork for the respectability and later the beatification of the merchant. In the church before Luther, the exemplars of faith were found in the monastic system....

Protestantism, and early Calvinism preeminently, wove asceticism into a systematic, carefully calculated program for organizing and shaping the whole lives of an entire people. From this flow the rationalization of time and admiration of industriousness so necessary for capitalism to thrive. Thus did the Protestant Ethic enable the spirit of capitalism.³³

Clapp pulls his punches by specifying that originally there were no hedonistic tendencies, that enjoyment of material possessions was in fact discouraged where not condemned, that production was the priority, rather than consumption. This, however, set the stage for the modern market.

Craig M. Gay's remarks confirm the idea that we are deceived to think that somehow the secular, materialistic mindset of the world has simply invaded the Church in the United States. He agrees that the Church in this country has had a part to play in the formation of the mindset from the very beginning: "...we have not been tricked into this, but...we actually chose this path several hundred years ago and continue to choose it on a more-or-less daily basis. Interestingly, Campbell traces the development of the Romantic ethic back to evangelical Protestant sources. In a manner similar to Weber's original Protestant ethic thesis, Campbell argues that Romantic sensibilities originated in Calvinism."³⁴

James Twitchell's comments also bear consideration. He too lays some of the blame for the cult of comfort of the Church in the United States at it's own feet, suggesting that Protestantism "unloaded" meaning attached to Roman Catholic

³³Clapp, "Theology of Consumption," 8-10, 174-76.

³⁴Gay, "Sensualists without Heart," 20, 28.

sacramental acts. Although these three quotes do not form one connected thought, but in fact come from three separate pages of Twitchell's book, *Lead Us Not Into Temptation*, consider the implications of each idea taken separately:

...the marketplace would capture this offloaded meaning and apply it to secular things. Buy this, you'll be saved. You deserve a break today. You, you're the one. We are the company that cares about you. You're worth it. You're in good hands. We care. Trust in us. We are here for you.³⁵

The rise of Consumer Culture did not just come from the Christian tradition, it was a central, albeit highly conflicted, aspect of the Christian tradition.³⁶

We have not been led into this world of material closeness against our better judgment. For many of us, especially when young, consumerism *is* our better judgment. And this is true regardless of class or culture. We have not just asked to go this way, we have demanded.³⁷

Ironically, history seems to show that the Church in the United States is not only influenced by the consumerism of this nation's society, but was also profoundly influential in its inception.³⁸

The result is a society where members of this country are encouraged daily by their televisions, Internet, billboards, gas-pump advertising, and even on displays above their urinals to consume, consume, consume. In the late 1990s, Duane Elgin observed that in the United States the average person saw more than 25,000 commercials each year.³⁹ George Akerlof noted a similar trend in print advertising: "On any given day, 18

³⁵Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation*, 30.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 150.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 286.

³⁸James 1:14. This argument lines up with the biblical view of human nature: "...but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed."

³⁹Duane Elgin, "Living More Simply and Civilizational Revitalization" in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997), 365.

billion display ads appear in magazines and daily newspapers across the United States. In consumer cultures like the United States the urge to buy is sanctioned, reinforced, and exaggerated in ways so numerous, so enticing, so subtle that ignoring them is not an easy option.”⁴⁰ “Have it your way,” the Burger King slogan, is the epitome of the marketing message: I am the most important being in the universe; my needs come first. John White writes, “We are like the monkey with his fist trapped inside the coconut shell clutching a fistful of peanuts. The monkey wants freedom and peanuts, and he cannot have both. He must leave the peanuts if he wants to get away. As a matter of fact he will lose both peanuts and freedom if he hangs on too long. And we are caught in a similar bind. We long to be free of earthly entanglements to serve God in the Spirit. Yet we cling to something more elusive than peanuts. We may only want *enough*. But without realizing it we redefine *enough* again and again with the passage of time. Others of us want to have as much as we can get. So we are full of darkness.”⁴¹

With this prevailing influence, is it any surprise when many Christians in the United States enter churches expressing a concern about whether this is a place where their needs are going to be met? What pastor is shocked when people come with questions such as: “Will this church have a worship service that is meaningful to me?” “Will it have a nursery that is comfortable for my baby?” “Are the children’s and youth ministries active and vital, so my children can have the best?” “Are the bathrooms big enough, clean enough, close enough, or fancy enough for my tastes?” And, “Why should

⁴⁰George A. Akerlof, “Procrastination and Obedience,” in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997), 229.

⁴¹White, *The Golden Cow*, 48.

I give my tithes and offerings when I do not feel like I am getting anything in return?”

The appetite of the cult of comfort is voracious, its influence virtually unstoppable. United States Christians are caught in its grasp. Church shopping is common. Church loyalty is at a minimum. In many situations, minor conflict results in church division, splits, or a new search for the ‘perfect church.’ Stephen Bertman suggests, “Our economic system values the new over the old, first as a consequence of true technological progress, and second as a means of earning profits—as sales are generated not only by actual consumer need but also by the public’s belief that a new model or style is better than the old one it replaces.”⁴² Men and women in career ministry are constantly faced with the need-based church consumer, and seek ways to help each church find “its niche” in the community. James Twitchell notes the unnerving similarity between marketing religion and marketing secular goods: “Both sell peace of mind either in this world or in the next. In both cases, the system appears to be coming from the top down, from the priests to the parishioners, from the producers to the consumers. In truth, however it works just as well the other way around. To a considerable degree the parishioners/consumers set the agenda and the priests/producers are forever scurrying around attempting to predict where demand will next appear.”⁴³

Ministry involvement is low.⁴⁴ School fund-raising, dance and violin lessons, and

⁴²Stephen Bertman, *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 26. He adds, “New models, new styles, even new commercials, captivate us and help products sell. In fact, in a speeded-up society, the very newness of a product (a car, a movie) increases its appeal. Each new disposable product becomes the materialization of a fleeting moment—a look, a feel, a taste, a sound, a smell—that advertising and a commercialized society convince us we must experience in order to be happy, so we can be as new as the world around us (45).

⁴³ Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation*, 55.

⁴⁴Leonard I. Sweet suggested during a D.Min. class session at George Fox Evangelical Seminary that 30% of the people in any given church do 70% of the work.

sports for the kids, bowling, tae kwon do, Kiwanis, Rotary, and PTA meetings for parents, and endless other good activities distract and detract Christians in the United States from meaningful and loyal commitments to valid and necessary kingdom-oriented ministries in and through their local churches. The desire to participate in a church that provides menu-ministry proliferates while the willingness to serve diminishes. Church involvement experiences meltdown as the body life moves from following the example of Christ, who came “...not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many...” to one that constantly murmurs, “I am not being fed!”

This is an attitude not dissimilar from those who profited from temple commerce, against which Jesus so violently reacted. For these alleged God-followers, the temple had become a place to turn a profit. Transitioning from a place primarily of offering honor and worth to God, the temple had become for them quite literally a place where they were “being fed.” “When Jesus shipped the irreligious garbage from temple precincts, it was the hub of a system of worship that alone could claim to show people a way to the knowledge of the Holy. It was a place where human beings might experience an encounter with their maker.”⁴⁵ For some, the place of giving had become a place to consume.

There is much to be learned about the traditional format of the worship service in light of the consumer mindset. Parishioners pay their offerings or tithes hoping to receive a service from the church, and therefore from its paid staff. Pastors are seen not so much as spiritual guides and mentors as hired teachers and worship-experience providers.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁵White, *The Golden Cow*, 128.

⁴⁶Philip Cushman cites a theoretical rationale for this process: “Kohut described a world in which, ideally, children develop in part by using their parents—by consuming, metabolizing, and then leaving

congregation arrives at the central church event each week, traditionally the Sunday worship service, ready and willing to do absolutely as little as possible.

The staff has been paid to supply the acceptable sacrifices and to offer them up on behalf of the paying customers in the pews. The preaching pastor has been handsomely or inadequately paid, whichever the case may be, to spend his time searching the Scriptures for profound tidbits for the congregants to consume as they would so many chocolate bon-bons. The effects are essentially the same, that of an immediate boost of energy followed by an almost-as-immediate crash, requiring a quick and greedy fill-up at the closest all-you-can-eat buffet and a hearty nap. In completing this transaction, the worshipers have a sense that they have fulfilled their spiritual duty and can return to another week of secular pursuits unhindered by conscience or the need to carry out ongoing acts of kindness and service to the poor, lost and oppressed. John White's words should reveal how deeply entrenched we are in the cult of comfort: "Some writers would at this point rise up to denounce the church in the West for luxuriating in wealth when Christians in other places are starving. And they would be right. We are callous and blind to the world's naked and hungry, be they our Christian brethren or our fellow human beings. While a devoted Christian lady is bothered because she cannot find her hair spray before setting out for her Sunday-school class, a Sudanese mother is watching her baby's eyes settle into the empty stare of death."⁴⁷

According to Rodney Clapp, Puritanism leaned heavily on establishing fitness for

them" (Cushman, *Constructing the Self*, 271-72). This is a lengthy process, one that requires time and patience on the part of both parent and child. In our rushed, consumer society, even proper consumption takes on a frantic nature, thwarting the growth process. This relates to the Church, in that people seem to think they can buy weekly spiritual lessons when a more patient and intensive process of apprenticeship is required for success. This process used to be known as discipleship, but has been effectively supplanted by weekly (or more accurately for many regular church attendees, monthly) worship, with perhaps a small group or Sunday-school class thrown in for good measure.

⁴⁷White, *The Golden Cow*, 94.

membership based on an emotional sense of one's connection to God, marked in this case by "a melancholy bearing, self-debasement and fascination with one's own death." Clapp argues that this "profound emotional sensibility" that proved one's godliness also laid the groundwork for consumeristic tendencies. As modern technology improved life, Puritan convictions waned, but the addiction to emotion did not. Genuine experience with God was replaced with pseudo-experiences that engendered similar emotional reactions:

Once convictions become conventions . . . the possibility of emotional self-indulgence is a real one." In describing intense emotion as enjoyable, Campbell is talking about something like our relishing the frights of a horror movie . . . or delighting in an amusement park ride . . . We pay money to savor the tears we weep, on cushioned theater seats, at a Shakespearean tragedy. So have our feelings become "a source of pleasure in themselves" and, as we will see, the primary consumer "object" of late modernity. . . Those who inherited the Puritan's mentality "had become addicted to the stimulation of powerful emotions, and were now seeking substitutes for the original."⁴⁸

Consumerist tendencies do not stop with church shopping. Worship shopping is now becoming a very real phenomenon. In response to the culture, for better or for worse, the emergent-church movement is diversifying the weekly worship event by adding prayer corners, meditation corners, clay-sculpting and drawing tables, video-loop walls, painting canvases, worship whiteboards, coffee and cappuccino and doughnuts and bagels and popcorn and cotton candy, massages, and countless other interactive and participatory worship experience sites throughout the worship venue.⁴⁹ An appeal is made

⁴⁸Clapp, "The Theology of Consumption," 179-80.

⁴⁹These can be experienced at any of a number of growing 'emergent,' churches including Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, Warehouse 242, and at conventions such as Soularize (theooze.com) and The Emergent Convention (emergentvillage.com). Lest the reader believe the author is opposed to this movement, let her or him make note of the fact that he is increasingly implementing this very approach in his own ministry setting. The question of this method's long-term effects remains, however.

It is important to note at this point that the emerging-church movement would consider itself inherently anti-consumerist. Doug Pagitt, a prominent leader in the emerging-church movement, was perhaps one of the first voices I have heard from inside the Church challenging pastors and leaders to

to cater more fully to the five senses.⁵⁰ For the emerging-church movement, this is a hopeful response to trends in the globalizing, secular culture, to the felt needs of many already active in the Church in the United States, and to a sense that the traditional Church in this country is failing to adequately speak to many in the postmodern context. At the same time, it reflects United States Church's cultic embrace of the consumer culture and its indoctrination. Stephen Bertman cautions against the market-driven approach to church services:

As an organism with its own survival instincts, organized religion may inevitably try to modernize. But this survival strategy has its own built-in flaw. If religion modernizes too much, it may cease to be what it once was. With its foundation eroded, it may collapse; with its interior gutted, it may become hollow. By deliberately synchronizing itself with society in order to retain and increase congregational membership, a religious organization may become as amorphous as the society it seeks to win over. Having become a now religion instead of a traditional one, it may no longer be able to give its congregants what they most need—a steadfast anchor in a stormy sea.⁵¹

It is difficult to speculate whether newer worship environments will have positive or negative results on the church and kingdom. The long-term effects remain to be seen.

consider just how consumerist we really are in our approach to 'doing church.' His church has decentralized its worship experience (Doug often apologizes from the platform in the convention setting for being in a position where the audience "must sit and listen to the talking head," a necessary evil of the convention mode) including moving their worship music team away from the front, if indeed there remains any front at all. This is to help alleviate the "we pay, you preach" consumerist attitude in worship.

⁵⁰At Emergent Convention 2003, each one of the five major worship services was dedicated to the stimulation of one of the five senses. Stephen Bertman's words, at the very least, should encourage the Church to be cautious in this approach: "A consumerist society, in turn, is one in which the senses play an extraordinarily significant role, not only because the senses are the socially preferred avenue to gratification, but also because they are so readily available as an avenue of economic and political exploitation. The primacy of the senses in such a society facilitates the subversion of reason. This is because the senses respond to things spontaneously and rapidly, whereas, by comparison, reason is slow and deliberate" (Bertman, *Hyperculture*, 38).

⁵¹Ibid., 60.

Ultimately, the consumer mindset, the mentality that people are “in church”⁵² in order to receive God’s best for them, undermines the very basic kingdom imperative as modeled by Jesus and of which he spoke, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”⁵³

One very noteworthy illustration of the emphasis on receiving is heard in the testimony in the United States of church members even from early childhood at summer camps, during baptism ceremonies, and in other settings. When asked what decision persons have made for Christ, the answer among a large number of believers is a perfunctory, “I got saved!” When the core message of Christianity is the utter abandonment of oneself to God for God’s purposes and perhaps to complete temporal destruction, it seems odd that the emphasis would be on the direct opposite, on what one might get out of God. In light of the cult of comfort, however, this is not so surprising. Consumers participate in order to consume, to take, to receive. Christ, on the other hand, came not to consume, but to be consumed, to give, to serve, and he clearly expects the same from his followers.

A kingdom imperative revolves around this servanthood principle, noted also in Matthew 6:33, where Jesus tells his followers to take the focus and priority of their thoughts and actions off their concern for material possessions and consumption and to place their focus rather on the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God contrasts the fleetingness of this life and its “stuff” with the eternal significance of people. Peter exhorts his readers “to love one another deeply” because of the perishable nature this

⁵²As opposed to “part of the Church.”

⁵³Mark 10:45.

creation has when there is not a direct connection to the Giver of Life, when persons refuse to take advantage of the eternal Word's ability to implant an imperishable seed.⁵⁴

The kingdom imperative makes stuff secondary and people primary, understanding that the eternal nature of the kingdom is found in its inhabitants, not in their possessions.

Craig Gay reminds us of Jesus' words in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew—"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"—and adds, "To imagine that we can create or sustain ourselves by means of our possessions or consumption habits, Jesus suggests, is tragically mistaken. It is also stupid. For such things have no lasting future. If we stake our identities—our selves—to these things, then we will pass away with them."⁵⁵

Persons trapped in the cult of comfort, and people who participate in churches with the primary purpose of receiving, will find it difficult to do more than take. After all, consumers come to shop, not to run the market. Churches cannot afford to fail to address this cultural influence, not merely through teaching but also in the structure of their worship meeting as the primary function of church as Christians in this country know it. Those churches that do not address this issue will merely propagate consumerism in their constituencies. As John White suggests, "At least a part of the church is being made in the image of Western materialism. The tragic outcome of this is a movement which often uses the preaching of the gospel as a means of organizational self-aggrandizement."⁵⁶

Church leaders need to recognize this tendency towards Western materialism as

⁵⁴1 Peter 1:22-25.

⁵⁵Gay, "Sensualists without Heart," 37.

⁵⁶White, *The Golden Cow*, 77.

they negotiate the cult of comfort like the minefield that it is. Robert E. Lane suggests, “People often do not know what makes them happy.”⁵⁷ It is therefore the church leaders’ responsibility to offer congregants what they need, not just what they want. If churches multiply spiritual consumers, then it should be no surprise that success in fulfilling Jesus’ command to “go make disciples” will continue to be minimal in the United States. Why should people “go make” when their primary motivation in participating is to “come take?” Why should persons take to heart verbal admonitions to become serious participating members of the kingdom when the foremost structure of their church, the main worship service, augments the cultural priority of consumption? And why should we expect a powerful expression of “kingdom come” in churches and communities in the United States if the priority of Christians and churches is to selfishly pursue their own comfort first and foremost?

Philip Cushman boldly accepts the role that psychotherapy has played in this same alleged promotion of consumerism. Perhaps the Church in this country would profit from humbly joining in his admission:

Psychotherapy has not been immune from all this. Without psychotherapists realizing it, our theories have often reflected the post-World War II consumer landscape, normalized its necessary ingredients such as the empty self, and explained away its unavoidable consequences, such as emotional isolation, selfishness, drug addiction, and the nihilistic use of others. Psychotherapy theories consider these consequences to be anomalies, deviations from the healthy norm, and therefore we set out to heal them. If we were to historically situate our practices we might consider that these consequences are in fact not anomalies but the norm, and that when we medicalize and pathologize the norm, we ignore the dangers of the status quo and unknowingly perpetuated it. Ultimately, we have helped reproduce an aspect of the cultural landscape we abhor. By

⁵⁷Robert E. Lane, “Friendship or Commodities? The Road Not Taken: Friendship, Consumerism and Happiness” in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman and David Kiron (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997), 103.

reifying the self, we have helped construct reified people. Reified people, in turn, require reified cures. “Thirty-nine Shades. Find Yourself.”⁵⁸

While proving or disproving beyond a shadow of a doubt that the better part of the Church in this country is in fact promoting consumerism is beyond the scope of this chapter, one vital statistic may be significant. In his doctoral studies culminating in 1983, while surveying churches in the United States, Dann Spader found that in 87% of churches, 100% of the programming was geared toward the spiritual growth of the attending believers.⁵⁹ In other words, his research showed that the focus of most churches in the United States was on taking care of themselves, with little or no emphasis on reaching out to those outside the body or on training their constituents to do so. John White is much more brash in his estimation of the church:

In his role as the last and great prophet Jesus warned his followers about forgetting to whom they belonged and of selling themselves to mammon. Against commercialized desecration of the Temple he acted violently, expressing the same moral reprehension that inspired earlier prophets to call God’s people a whore.

The twentieth-century church has also forgotten which master she belongs to, painting herself like a hussy in her silly pursuit of Lord mammon. Or, to use another image, the church has gone a-whoring after a golden cow.

Not a calf, if you please, but a cow. I call her a *golden* cow because her udders are engorged with liquid gold, especially in the West where she grazes in meadows lush with greenbacks. Her priests placate her by slaughtering godly principles upon whose blood she looks with tranquil satisfaction. Anxious rows of worshipers bow down before their buckets. Although the gold squirts endlessly the worshipers are trembling lest the supply of sacrificial victims should one day fail to appease her.⁶⁰

If Spader’s statistic is even remotely indicative of the state of the United States

⁵⁸Cushman, *Constructing the Self*, 277-78.

⁵⁹As referenced by Dr. David Livermore at a Sonlife Strategy Seminar in Platteville, Wisconsin at the Platteville Free Methodist Church on 12 April 2003.

⁶⁰White, *The Golden Cow*, 67-68.

Church and White's estimation is only as much as doubly overstated, then it is safe to assume the Church of this nation is ingrown at least partly because of its habit of offering to its congregations spiritual goods for consumption to no end.

All of these factors, and perhaps dozens more, have connections to the consumeristic culture that the Church of the United States has both fostered and followed, each with negative impact upon the possible kingdom potential of this branch of the Church.⁶¹ The negative impact on evangelism, the kingdom imperative according to Jesus,⁶² is perhaps the most devastating. This may be the reason for the primary mandate of Jesus' economically oriented lifestyle command to lay up treasures in heaven⁶³ and to seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness.⁶⁴ If something within a culture, and thus within its people, drives it away from its most basic purpose, that feature of the culture must be of grave concern. As White writes, "The problem is that sacrilege cannot be defined. It arises both from spiritual colorblindness and from callous indifference to the longing of those whose hearts seek after God. We therefore must examine our own hearts. We can ask ourselves whether we have been lured into the seats of the moneychangers. We can ask God to show us the motives in our hearts in any matter where money has to do with the sacred person of our Lord and God. If the Holy Spirit shows us we are in any way involved in desecration, we can quit. There may be financial

⁶¹I considered the following possible negative connections between consumerism and the Church in the United States: The Church's role in the formation of the ghetto; an emphasis on building, grounds, and facility over people, relationships, and community; the rising cost of Christian education and its effects on the role of pastor as professional clergy; the connection between God's "cattle on a thousand hills" and the diminishing tithe; individualism versus community; Have the poor, the young, the old been forgotten?

⁶²Matthew 28:18-20.

⁶³Luke 12:22-34.

⁶⁴Matthew 6:19-34, especially verses 33-34.

loss. There may be embarrassment. But there will be refreshment and renewal in our lives.”⁶⁵

To be taken seriously, Christians need to judge the predominant spirit and pointing out its flaws while offering hope and help to those who protest it. What seems to have happened instead in the United States is that Christianity has accepted the vision of the predominant spirit. Many Christians in this country have had no problem accepting modern worldview and believing that science and technology will answer many of the problems that face the world. Paul Hiebert addresses this: “So long as the missionary comes with a two-tiered worldview, with God confined to the supernatural and the natural world operating for all practical purposes according to autonomous scientific laws, Christianity will continue to be a secularizing force in the world. Only as God is brought back into the middle of our scientific understanding of nature will we stem the tide of Western secularism.”⁶⁶

How often do Christians here give God passing or even passionate thanks for “helping us” find cures to the world’s diseases and better uses for plastic and clearer communication through Sprint PCS? How often do we embrace the spirit of progress without much thought to the possible implications for the environment and humanity? How often do we literally ‘buy’ into the consumerist mindset as reflected by our garages, packed with anything but cars (of which we often have two or three or more), by our basements lined with unused toys, and by our closets with enough clothes to adequately cover several families?

⁶⁵White, *The Golden Cow*, 134-35.

⁶⁶Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 199.

Christians say they are interested in environmental stewardship, but do they really turn off the TV to cut down on the need for megawatt production by fossil-fuel burning power plants, which hourly produce significant amounts of contaminating by-products such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, and mercury? Do they reduce, reuse, and recycle at even a reasonable rate? Do they forego extra shoes and clothes or food and trips to the mall to help lower the huge rate of over-consumption by the United States? For a token few, I am sure the answer is yes. For the vast majority of Christians in the United States, the honest answer is arguably no.⁶⁷ In fact, when Christians in this country should have been taking a stand against growing materialism and consumerism at any cost, they were instead involved in the feeding frenzy, becoming a cult of comfort. The culture raised questions and then lost hope because it did not have the answers, when Christianity should have been helping raising the questions and offering incarnational rather than cliché answers. Hiebert suggests, “We in the West are well trained to do jobs. We are not skilled in building relationships. Yet the fruit of the Spirit are expressed in relationships, and relationships are at the heart of all lasting evangelism. ...The gospel is about relationship, not programs—about relationship with God, one another as Christians, and a lost world.”⁶⁸

Over the last several decades, the United States Church may have been resistant to the cultural maladies of materialism and consumerism on a vocal and philosophical level, but its actions spoke louder than words. It has lost its footing in the tide of the culture,

⁶⁷“... many of us who call ourselves Christians begin to look more like materialists. We talk of heaven but we strive for things....Yet Christians are rarely happy as materialists. Heaven tugs at us too vigorously. We find ourselves apologizing for our new cars or our larger houses. This tug of war renders most Christians ill at ease and at times ineffective” (White, *The Golden Cow*, 38-39).

⁶⁸Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 145-46.

and has found itself being swept out to sea by a dangerous undertow. What is true for those who do not claim to follow Christ seems to be true for many Christians in the United States as well: “What people believe no longer makes much difference to how they behave. Unless reversed, this hollowing out of beliefs will finally be America’s undoing.”⁶⁹ Hiebert adds, “Too often it is not a lack of truth that holds us back, but our willingness to obey the truth we do have.”⁷⁰ Put another way, one could suggest that by pursuing comfortable living ahead of sacrificial living, Christians and churches in this country have adversely affected their ability to participate in “kingdom come.”

I had an interesting experience one Sunday morning in the fall of 2002. I attended two very different churches, on opposite ends of the spectrum yet within ten miles of each other. Both were evangelical churches in the holiness tradition. One is well over a hundred years old and boasts close to 1,000 in Sunday morning attendance. This is a traditional church, attempting to offer a mix of hymns and contemporary music,⁷¹ and with a completely predictable order of service. In this church I heard the youth pastor share these words in a message about fear and trust to the junior high youth, “God would never do anything to hurt you!” The second church is just one year old, is running around 650 in Sunday morning attendance, and is anything but traditional. This church is much more unpredictable. For instance, the pastor might start his message and just as he seems to be moving along at a good clip he might interrupt the flow to say, “Oh, by the way, this is such-and-such church, and I am pastor so-and-so, and this is a church that exists

⁶⁹Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 18.

⁷⁰Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 31.

⁷¹My definition of “contemporary music” in the church is “70’s-style church music”—itself largely worn and outdated, aging much more quickly than hymns due to its more shallow nature.

for people who do not care about church.” Or someone will come running up and interrupt and go off on a crazy skit out of the blue, or you will walk in from grabbing a cappuccino in the narthex, (the Greek word for ‘school cafeteria,’ since this church does not meet in a traditional church building), and see a clip from a classic movie. One just never knows. On the same Sunday morning as mentioned above, the pastor said, “Do you really want to know the will of God?! Do you really want to be IN the will of God? If you do find yourself in God’s will, you might just find that things get worse, instead of better.” This being said, this church not only puts an atypical face on church, but presents a very non-traditional message.

These two approaches to God’s word and God’s activity among his human creation are at odds. One spouts the normative churchy platitude: “God wants to bless you real good!” The other takes a more biblical, parable-inspired, paradoxical approach and says, “Chasing after God is just going to get you into trouble.”

Both churches are filled to capacity. Both have a large group of people who show up each week seeking God in some form. If all people wanted was comfort, the second church would be empty. If all people wanted was the promised discomfort that seeking to fulfill the kingdom imperative invariably brings, the first would be choired by crickets. What is this telling us?

The simple answer is that some people believe that they just have to be comforted and comfortable. Some Christians do not want to be told that the basic call to every Christian is to GO and make a difference in the life of someone who is headed to hell. For them, it is great if the ‘sinner’ wants to come and hear about God. Their take on the role of the Church is that it will be around for “that kind of people” when they are ready

to repent. Os Guinness counters, “If cultural drift goes on, however, real persuasion may soon be needed—of people who are closed, not open, not interested, and not needy, ‘unchurched Harrys and Marys’ who will never darken the doors of even the most super of superchurches. If that day dawns, the unchurched will not come to us. We must leave the church and go out to them—as missionaries of Christ have always done.”⁷²

Has the Church in the United States challenged individuals to enter a kingdom that requires sacrifice, or instead offered to sell them a misleading commodity of comfort? Craig M. Gay writes, “Our first duty, then, as Wendell Berry insists, is to ‘resist the language, the ideas, and the categories of this ubiquitous sales talk, no matter from whose mouth it issues.’ We must also encourage our neighbor to look beyond the mundane horizons of material existence for truly human meanings and purposes.”⁷³ If it is the responsibility of Christians to help free others from the quagmire of consumerism, should Christians not first extricate themselves by the grace and through the power of God? In Luke 6:41-42, Jesus appears to be telling us this is the case.

Some might argue that since the Israelites were commanded by God to plunder the Egyptians on their way out of Egypt (Exodus 3:21-22), we too should plunder our culture’s valuables for the sake of the kingdom. While I might be convinced to agree with the heart of this statement, the fact is, “Far from leading to an exodus, modern church growth often uses the ideology and tools of Egypt to make the life of the people of God more comfortable in captivity.”⁷⁴ The question remains: Whose kingdom is the Church to be building? Are we to be pursuing our own comfort, or are we to be sacrificially

⁷²Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 82.

⁷³Gay, “Sensualists without Heart,” 38.

⁷⁴Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 21.

pursuing a world separated from God in order to present it with and model to it the good news of God's love and salvation?

Another defense of the 'comfortable Christian' lifestyle would be the argument that Christians must fully embrace the culture in order to relate to others in it. Os Guinness would respond:

Known technically as "contextualization," or more simply as "relevance," this principle is indispensable to communication and obviously rooted in Scripture. The supreme pattern of the "contextualization" and "relevance" is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Such passages as 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 capture its full dynamic perfectly, climaxing in Paul's summary: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

But scripture and history are also clear: Without maintaining critical tension, the principle of identification is a recipe for compromise and capitulation. It is no accident that the charge of being "all things to all people" has become a popular synonym for compromise. If the process of becoming "all things to all people" is to remain faithful to Christ, it has to climax in clear persuasion and profound conversion. Joining people where they are is only the first step in the process, not the last.⁷⁵

Again an important question must be raised: Is this "critical tension" currently being maintained by even a majority of Christians in the United States? Guinness speaks of a "gigantic paradox" between Christianity and the current culture:

Another way to express the paradox is that modernity simultaneously makes evangelism infinitely easier but discipleship infinitely harder. Ponder the fact that the twentieth century was heralded as "the Christian Century," summed up aptly at the beginning of the century in John R. Mott's slogan—"the evangelization of the world in this generation." Yet the century is ending, as Jacques Ellul says, in a situation closer to the saying of Jesus, "When the son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" The problem is not that Christians have disappeared, but that Christian faith has become so deformed. Under the influence of modernity, we modern Christians are literally capable of winning the world while losing our own souls.⁷⁶

⁷⁵Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 28.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 43.

Rather than reflecting recognition and acceptance of the kingdom imperative, the actions of many Christians and churches in this country seem to reflect a belief that they are blessed by God and are therefore given the divine go-ahead to seek progress at any expense, as long as it benefits them. John White writes, “What does it all boil down to? It comes to this: we Christians are too often like sponges soaked to capacity with the value system of the society we live in.... We may argue fiercely with one another but we base our arguments on the same premise: the greatest good in life is a bigger (or better-cooked) slice of this world’s pie, a pie to which we all have an inalienable right.”⁷⁷ This is a warped, even cultic interpretation of the opening command of the Creator God to the woman and the man in the garden, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”⁷⁸

The cult of comfort is an enthusiastic embrace of consumerist behaviors by the United States Church. It reveals a widespread attitude of selfishness and ‘better-than-others-ness.’ While the culture continues to seek God at God’s own encouragement, the Church at large in this country may lose any chance of engaging the culture with the kingdom of God and instead float off into ethereal self-absorption amidst its pursuit of comfort. As noted in the next two chapters, this cult of comfort, left uncurbed and exacerbated by the escapist mindset of popular eschatologies, very likely will continue to perpetuate a sense of egocentrism that much of the secular culture and the emerging-church movement has already begun to reject.

The basic thesis of this paper is that the pursuit of comfort in the United States

⁷⁷White, *The Golden Cow*, 76.

⁷⁸Genesis 1:28a.

plays out in ways that are antithetical to kingdom principles. Since the kingdom of God is the main driving purpose and motivation of the Christian life as presented by Jesus in the Gospels, kingdom principles must saturate the life and breath of the church. When energy and resources are diverted from following kingdom principles and pursuing kingdom actions and results, the potential for the Church of this nation to be an inclusive, transformational Christ community capable of helping Christians live biblical Great Commission lifestyles is weakened. Faulty theological perspectives, such as those we find in the next chapter, strengthen the cult of comfort and only make the problem worse.

CHAPTER 3

LEFT BEHIND, PRAISE GOD: EFFECTS OF AN ESCAPIST ATTITUDE ON THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

Where Is Everyone?

School is out. A ten-year-old boy makes the quarter-mile journey across town to his home wearing a backpack and carrying his mother's cornet that he is learning to play in the school band. He dumps his things in a corner of the kitchen, grabs a snack, and runs out to the small barn behind the house to check on the rabbits and throw a bale of hay out for the three steers the family is raising on their small three-and-half-acre farm in a tiny town in Washington State.

His chores done and his homework already completed, he runs down through the neighbor's small field, jumps the ditch and crosses one of the two main roads in town, and hurries up the hill of another field to the home of his two best friends. About dinnertime he realizes he better get home, and he makes the short trip back. Winded, he jumps the five steps up the back porch and bursts in through the kitchen door, expecting the smell of dinner and the voices of his mother, father, and thirteen-year-old brother.

But the kitchen is empty. Nothing is cooking on the stove, nothing warming in the microwave. No voices, no radio, no sound as he holds his breath to listen closely, only to hear his own heart beating. Where is everybody?

And then he remembers. This young boy was in the evening service just a few Sundays ago at his church when they showed a film from a rented movie reel on the

church's projector and small movie screen. He always loved it when they showed a movie on a church night. It was out of the ordinary, which made it fun and exciting. And plus, he did not have to listen to a second sermon on those Sundays!

Last Sunday had been one of those days. But it was no ordinary church film that was shown. It was not Dr. James Dobson teaching parents how to be better parents, or a documentary on the Mormons' god-maker theology. This was a real movie, and a scary one at that. Together the church watched a new Christian drama, *Thief in the Night*.⁷⁹ And it had not been many months earlier that another movie had been shown. This one was entitled, *Image of the Beast*.⁸⁰

Wow! Those films had really scared the hell out of the young boy. That was their intended purpose, after all. The message was clear. Choose Jesus Christ and escape out the back door, or rebel against God and be *left behind* to fend for yourself when all the Christians are raptured and God's Holy Spirit has departed from planet earth.

The ideas cling to the corners of his mind and snapshots of the story flash before his eyes on this particular night. The only thing more peculiar than the extreme silence in the house is the perceived drop in temperature. WHERE IS EVERYONE?!

No one answers his calls. His mother and father are Christians. Are they gone? He thought he was a Christian, but he had his doubts. Had he forgotten to confess some sinful pre-teenage thought or angry word or selfish action to Jesus, and thus forfeited his salvation? Could he have been left behind?!

Sounds like another movie spin-off from those early 70s and 80s rapture movies.

⁷⁹Russell S. Doughten and Donald W. Thompson, *Thief in the Night*, (Des Moines, IA: Russ Doughten Films, 1972), 69 minutes.

⁸⁰Russell S. Doughten and Donald W. Thompson, *Image of the Beast* (Des Moines, IA: Russ Doughten Films, 1980), 93 minutes.

Perhaps it is the opening to a children's version of that very popular rapture series. It is not. It is a true story. It is my story. I lived through those feelings more than once as I was growing up, because I believed this theory about the rapture as it was propagated in my church. I bought it hook, line, and sinker. As a child I was led to believe that this is what the Bible suggests and what the Church believes. Why would a little boy think any differently?

That little boy has grown up now, and has read the Bible through many times for himself. He has lived a little as a Christian adult in the United States, has seen some of the harsh realities of life here and abroad, and has studied enough of global Christianity and Church history to begin considering a completely different perspective.

The discussion at hand is how the cult of comfort affects the response of the Church to the biblical kingdom imperative. What does eschatology have to do with the driving purpose and function of the church? I would suggest that the pre-tribulation rapture theory, what one might call the rapture myth, taught by many churches and popularized again in recent United States Christian culture as orthodox, biblical fact is an excellent illustration of our infatuation with comfort and our correlating fear of sacrifice and suffering. I believe that the readiness of a large portion of the Church in this country to accept the rapture myth *carte blanche* despite its apparent contradiction of Scripture and history, and without regard for its absence from orthodox Christianity for at least eighteen hundred years, is a gauge of the extent to which the Church in the United States has fallen prey to the comfort-driven tendencies of our culture. I also believe that an acceptance of such ear-tickling doctrine plays a powerful part in perpetuating a vicious cycle, which results in kingdom resources being diverted towards greater comfort rather

than deeper involvement in the kingdom imperative. Paul Heibert writes,

We who live in the end-times face great opportunities and great dangers. In the last days the gospel will be preached to the ends of the earth. There will also be a great falling away, as many—including Christians—are deceived. It is important, therefore, that we listen to God as he speaks to us through his Spirit and that we test the voices we hear to make certain that they are, indeed, from God. God has given us his Word to keep and proclaim. May we be found faithful to that trust.⁸¹

A Biblical Response

It is important that we compare some of the ideas surrounding common conceptions of ‘the rapture’ with Scripture. Although it is not my intent to disprove every variation of pre-tribulation rapture theology, I do believe the rapture myth is particularly fallible. A significant passage of Scripture to understand is the very one from which the most highly popularized phrase for our day relating to the rapture myth has come, namely ‘left behind.’⁸² In the 24th chapter of Matthew, we find these words: “That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.”⁸³

Too often that is exactly how this portion of Scripture is read when considering its relevance to theories of the second coming of Jesus the Christ. This section of Scripture is pulled out of context as an argument for the rapture theory, allowing readers who are influenced by popular conceptions of the rapture to determine without further thought

⁸¹Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 253.

⁸²There are 8 occurrences of the phrase ‘left behind’ in the NIV, 2 in the KJV, 3 in the NKJV, 5 in the NRSV, and 5 in the NASB. Not one of these refers in any way to the end times or the ideas disseminated by the rapture myth.

⁸³Matthew 24:39b-41.

that the forgiven Christian will be taken away when the Son of Man returns (referring to the second coming of Jesus Christ), while the rebellious pagan will be left behind.

We should look a little closer. These are Jesus' very own words on the subject of the end-times, so they are worth our full attention. By starting so late in the passage, a reader can tend to become myopic. Instead, let us try reading a much larger portion of the passage so we can evaluate it within its context:

²⁹Immediately after the distress of those days “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”³⁰ At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.³¹ And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

³²Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.³³ Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.³⁴ I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³⁶No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark;³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.⁸⁴

At first glance, verse 31 affirms the ideas the reader may already have believed about the rapture. Perhaps there is a sense that the angels will sweep in and whisk us all away, leaving only the unbelievers. A broader look at Scripture reveals this to be wishful thinking. We need to put much deeper thought into this passage in its entirety. Taking a closer look at the context of the Scriptures that surround verses 40 and 41, we see that

⁸⁴Matthew 24:29-41.

Jesus uses a story from faith history and then two word pictures, real-life scenarios, to explain his description of the end-times. It would be wise for us not just to read over these illustrations, but also to meditate on their meanings. As thoughtful readers, we should try to discover what parallels Jesus may be drawing.

Look at his two word pictures. The first is a picture of two men about their day's business; while they are in the field, one is taken and the other is not. The second is a picture of two women about their day's business; while they are grinding at the mill, one is taken and the other is not. Jesus says this is how it will be at his second coming: "That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."⁸⁵ But who is taken and who is left behind at the coming of the Son of Man? Traditional perspectives on the rapture tell us that the righteous one is taken and the wicked one is left behind, but is that really what Jesus says?

By continuing to look backwards in Scripture, we can broaden the context and answer the question, "To which illustration is Jesus referring?" Notice verses 37-39 which immediately precede these word pictures. Here Jesus is talking about the story of Noah, which is found in chapter six of the first book of the Bible, Genesis.

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth--men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air--for I am grieved that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

This is the account of Noah.

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.⁸⁶

⁸⁵Matthew 24:39.

⁸⁶Genesis 6:5-9.

Noah was the only godly man on earth. God saved him from God's wrathful punishment against a wicked generation. Noah and his family alone were left behind while the rest of humanity was destroyed, wiped away, and as completely erased as an earth-shattering cataclysm of planetary proportions can possibly do. That is the story Jesus refers to in Matthew chapter 24.

Who was taken away, according to Jesus in verse 39? It was "them." It is "them" who knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them away. It is "them" who were eating and drinking and giving in marriage. In fact, Jesus says that everybody BUT Noah and his family were taken away, while righteous Noah was left behind. This too is how it will be at the second coming of Jesus, according to his own words: "...so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."⁸⁷ So the very phrase many Christians have been using for decades in the United States to describe what they did not want to happen to them when Jesus returned, a phrase popularized by certain popular literature, is in fact the very phrase Jesus the Christ uses to describe what will happen to the righteous on the day of his return. The faithful ones will be left behind while the wicked will be taken away to their eternal doom.

Understanding Jesus' own description of the end to say that the *believers* will be left behind cripples any further suggestion that they will first be plucked away until some more comfortable time of re-entrance post-tribulation, post-judgment, post-real-life trauma. So much for our easy, exit-stage-left, relaxed and affluent American⁸⁸ Body of

⁸⁷Matthew 24:37.

⁸⁸I originally wrote "USAmerican Body of Christ," but for reasons mentioned early in the footnotes of this paper, this was edited out. At the same time, I couldn't think of any other way to say this without really muddling up the phrase. I will have to let it stand and hope for the best.

Christ. This only makes sense since it is Jesus who tells us in the Gospels that we are supposed to be the light in a dark world (not exiting it with lightning speed), and to be salt in a world going rotten (not saluting as we beat a hasty retreat). This would explain why pulling us out during history's darkest hour would directly contradict the 'left behind, praise God' attitude Christians should embrace, an attitude that reflects the heart of a God who consistently goes to extreme measures to rescue the lost world and wishes to use God's people to complete this mission.

The Rapture Myth

What is this 'rapture myth' that I suggest poses such a threat to our effectiveness as sincere followers of the one true God in a world largely defined by pagan culture? I believe that out of a comfort-driven culture comes a certain escapist interpretation of various biblical passages. This interpretation as to how events will play out when God decides to bring about the end of time is what I call the rapture myth.⁸⁹ In essence, the

⁸⁹According to this eschatology, there will be a series of circumstances that will unfold. They will take place like clockwork with very little variance from the outline. Various natural signs and wonders will occur, marking the beginning of the end. Like a thief in the night, Christ will return for his Bride, the Church. All those Christians who are alive will disappear, taken up with Jesus into heaven in the blink of an eye. The Holy Spirit sent by God to woo the unbeliever and to fill the saint with power to live the holy life will depart planet earth. She will be left Godless, Christian-less, hopeless for a period of seven years while things go from bad to worse. Those branded with the number 666 or some computer-generated code based on that number, which is the Mark of the Beast (the satanic ruler of the world), on their right hand or forehead will scan their faces across the UPC reader at the local Super Wal-Mart and have plenty to eat. Those who do not take the Mark will be unable to purchase anything. They may have a chance to get to heaven (those Marked are eternally damned), but at the very least they will die a gruesome death at the end of a gun or under a guillotine of the Beast's Nazi-like military. After terror upon terror comes to rest on those unfortunate enough to be left behind, the end will finally come and the eternal reign of Christ will begin.

In summary, the second-coming of Christ will take place, the Christians will exit stage left, the pagans will suffer for seven years, one final battle called Armageddon will take place between God and Satan, and of course the demonic hordes will be banished forever to the hell created for them along with those who choose to ignore God's gift of grace and rescue through His Son, Jesus Christ.

This is not a rigorous study of one or more sets of interpretations of complicated prophetic scriptures, nor is it a formal explanation of an official doctrine of any one sect of the church. It is the rapture theory

rapture myth provides an escape route for Christians, allowing them to exit to their eternal reward prior to any great end-times hardship and calamity.

Pre-tribulation rapture ideas remain to be proven. They are not biblical facts. They are not scriptural laws. They are not fully understood and soundly expounded explanations of end-times prophecy, nor do they even carry the weight of being timeworn doctrines handed down through the ages of Church tradition. Like many other interpretations of prophecy, they are theories, nothing more.

In fact, therein lays our best protection against the danger the rapture myth presents to strong kingdom values and actions. If we recognize it as a theory, we will be less likely to be led astray by it and more likely to adjust our own end-times beliefs by our contact with the Bible, rather than force the Bible to fit our end-times preconceptions in order to remain comfortable and allay any fear that our Christianity might cost us something or become somewhat painful. After all, which is the healthier approach when it comes to reading and understanding God's Word?

This theory may very well be the devil's most lethal strategy yet in his efforts to undermine the integrity of Christianity in the United States. The rapture myth could very well be a powerful tool to drive the Church of this nation over the brink of the cliff of casual, comfortable Christianity on which it already stands precariously balanced. In a Christian sub-culture which is engulfed in a larger culture where "He who dies with the

that is promoted through many popular venues as well as through basic church teaching in many churches. I personally have encountered this teaching repeatedly and in a variety of settings both in and out of churches in the twenty-five years since I first remember encountering it at about the age of ten. It is this brand of pre-tribulation- rapture theory I am addressing when I refer to the 'rapture myth.' Although it may not be found neatly expounded in an official work on eschatology, the theory is stated quite clearly and systematically during a scene in the movie, *Thief in the Night*. It plays out similarly in the currently popular *Left Behind* series (Tim F. LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996]).

most toys wins” and where true evangelism and care for the poor and oppressed does not appear to top the priority list anywhere but on paper, the last thing the church needs is an intense and passionate eschatology based on the idea that God wants to protect the church from harm to the detriment of the lost. A passionate lifestyle of sacrifice based on a strong belief to the contrary, that God may want me to give up everything for God’s kingdom and for the soul and well being of my neighbor may be the only motivation strong enough to boost the average Christian in this nation out of complacency and into missional kingdom involvement. Only by pursuing sacrifice ahead of comfort will Christians and churches in the United States positively affect their ability to participate in “kingdom come.”

An escapist eschatology like the rapture theory may sound great to some, but it must be examined for biblical soundness. If the rapture myth is correct, then so be it. If it is weak, the Church in America needs to develop an end-times theology that more closely matches with the overall message of Scripture.

I believe that the rapture myth promotes complacency with its main theme of removing Christians from hardship when and where they are needed most. Christians in the United States need a new perspective, a new driving force, a new attitude when it comes to serving others and daily living out our faith. As will be shown, a more biblical model is one that promotes a relentless commitment to the eternal and physical welfare of others, though it costs us greatly, both as individuals and as churches. Rather than embrace the empty promises of an escapist eschatology that tickles our fancy, we need to welcome the thought of being left behind, praising God that he would count us worthy of a less than comfortable life on planet earth. Our beliefs about how the end will come will

affect our behaviors as we prepare for the end to come. While an escapist eschatology hinders Christians from living out the kingdom imperative, a proper eschatology drives Christians back into a hurting world with a sense of urgency.

Since our theology shapes our belief, sound theology is essential. It is foolish to suggest that any theology is wholly sound (every theology is human in its core, and thereby flawed). However, to embrace unsound theology is equally foolish. I believe this particular eschatology is biblically unsound. This theory is not just culturally biased, it is theologically unreliable. As will be discussed more at length in chapter four, it has been embraced by a weak Western Christianity mired in a cult of comfort and self-indulgence. As an active part of a vicious cycle, the rapture myth not only grows well in the comfort-driven culture, but propagates more of the same.

Rescue By Rapture

Allegedly, according to the rapture myth, God's plan at time's end is to pull the Christians out of the sinful, dark, and empty hell-on-earth of the pagan world just before we experience the negative effects of that world. The promise that is offered to all believers through Jesus' tribulation and sacrificial death on the cross is not that we will be raptured when faced with trials. Becoming a Christ-follower does not afford us an escape from the troubles and turmoils of life. On the contrary, we are promised trials! James did not look for an easy out, but instead tells us to consider these troubled times as pure joy. Paul could have tried to avoid affliction, but rather he exults in the fact that he is allowed to share in Christ's suffering: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may

also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”⁹⁰

According to accepted Christian history and legend, none of the apostles looked for ways to flee the cruelty of a pagan world following Jesus’ resurrection. Instead, they embraced the cross by actively preaching Christ crucified and by accepting suffering and death as it was meted out to them because of their faith.⁹¹ Countless Scriptures clearly confront the escapist attitude and lifestyle behind the comfortable Christianity subscribed to wholeheartedly by many in this country.⁹² Paul calls us quite clearly who our example should be and what mindset our lifestyle should reflect:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!⁹³

These Scriptures are just a handful among many that pointedly expose the comfort-driven, escapist left behind mentality as one that stands in stark contradiction to the sacrifice-driven mentality of the Bible—the sacrificial model Jesus described, advocated, lived out, and required of his followers throughout his years of ministry

⁹⁰Romans 8:17-18.

⁹¹Robert C. Jones <robertcjones@mindspring.com>, “Meet the Apostles: Biblical and Legendary Accounts,” curriculum in *Christian History and Theology Adult Sunday School Classes* available from <www.sundayschoolcourse.com/apostles/aposmain.htm>

⁹²Consider just a few: 2 Tim 1:8-12; Heb 10:32-39; 1 Pet 1:3-7; 2:18-25; 4:1-2, 12-19; Phil 2:1-30; Luke 17:22-25, 32-33.

⁹³Philippians 2:5-8.

among us. This would agree with real life, where the greatest successes are almost always the result of great sacrifices or, as I recently heard in a sermon, “Anything prized requires effort.”⁹⁴

Some, on the other hand, would argue that stories of raptured Christians abound and that it is valid for us to expect God to do the same for us.⁹⁵ I believe, however, that such accounts are relatively rare. Even the fact that there may be substantiated, isolated instances of Christians rescued directly from tribulation must be soberly tempered by the fact that throughout the ages Christians have lived and died through terrible persecutions, with accounts of hundreds of thousands of Christian believers’ being martyred in just the last hundred years in places like Nazi Germany, Communist Russia, Europe, and China, and Islamic Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Sudan, to name a few. If God’s plan is to rescue the faithful Christian from pain and torture and tribulation, why does God consistently refuse to do so?

A well-rounded look at the rapture myth from the standpoints of Scripture, church tradition, historical evidence, and everyday experience appear to reveal many holes in this eschatology.

Shaped By Our Own Story

Rapturous escape or sacrificial investment in the turmoil of God’s fallen creation: which is the biblical Christian model? If sacrificial living is the correct answer, are

⁹⁴Randy Richter, Pastor, Hillside Wesleyan Church, Cedar Rapids, IA, 21 August 2005, second worship service.

⁹⁵Although the word ‘rapture’ is often used to reflect an end-time event, in some circles it is used more generally to describe the miraculous removal of persons, such as Elijah and Enoch, from this life to the next. Incidences of modern-day raptures have been reported, if not confirmed, usually originating in foreign missionary circles.

United States Christians in general capable of it? Can Christians in this country even begin to grasp what it means to live sacrificially? Is our perspective so skewed by our cult of comfort, by the security and material luxuries that surround us, that it becomes nearly impossible for us grasp the true intent of Christ and his kingdom imperative? Does our story, our worldview, and a popular escapist eschatology prevent us from joining in the Gospel narrative?⁹⁶ David Bosch communicates how important our own particular story is in our faith journey:

Worldviews are integrative and interpretive frameworks by which order and disorder are judged, they are the standards by which reality is managed and pursued, sets of hinges on which all our everyday thinking and doing turns (Olthius 1991:4f). Worldviews are, of course, formed by several factors. It is not true as some religious fundamentalists like to argue that one's worldview is shaped solely by one's faith or by God. Worldviews are shaped by both inculcated (or assumed) faith convictions *and* by context, social status, emotional health, and the like. They are shaped by both "theory" and "practice," which condition each other, or, in Christian parlance, by both divine revelation and human experience. A worldview, moreover, functions both descriptively (it tells us what is or what is not the case) and normatively (it tells us what might or ought not to be the case). It is both a sketch of and a blueprint for reality, a vision *of* life and *for* life (:5).

The significance of all of this is critical. As a vision rooted in faith (*any* kind of faith) *and* experience, a worldview in its basic tenets is not argued *to*, but argued *from* (:8). It is not the terminus of our quest for insight, but our place of departure.^{97 98}

If our story is significantly deviant from God's story about and for humanity, we will lose our ability to serve God's kingdom purposes. When this happens, we cause ourselves the misery of a stunted potential and we rob others of the blessing God has

⁹⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Voices in the Night: The Prison Poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. and trans. by Edwin Robertson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 109.

⁹⁷*Nisi credideritis non intelligitis* ("unless you believe, you shall not understand")—Polanyi.

⁹⁸David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 49.

chosen to speak or enact through us. As in other cults, the deviant story turns aside all the streams of life, financial resources, personal energy, thought patterns, eating habits, meditational foci, decisions about the future, and so on, until our lives have flowed so far down the proverbial river that it is nearly impossible to return to the plain upstream which God created us to flood with God's love and truth and positive life change. We must examine our nation's Christian story, including the prevailing eschatology, and ensure that it coincides with the story of scriptural faith and followership of Christ.

Marjorie Reeves warns that the stories by which we live our lives have the power to enslave us as well as set us free.⁹⁹

The Bible has been the main source of spiritual story throughout the Christian centuries. ... God had revealed himself through the long succession of his 'engagements' in time and space with his people recorded in the Old Testament and their truth had been confirmed by the historical reality of the incarnation. History was the field of his activity and the inherited story of his actions was God's sign-writing. This shows us something of crucial importance about God's method of teaching his children; it was story rather than doctrine that nourished the spirituality of many generations because it fed the imagination. Story came first; doctrine afterwards.¹⁰⁰

This is why it is of extreme importance for Christians to live out the great story of the loving and merciful interaction of God with God's ultimate creation, humankind. While the story of our past, our history, can trap us in a pattern of needless suffering through the vicious cycle of sin, God's story is one of sacrifice for humanity, of reciprocating with a sacrificial response, of ultimate victory and liberation for God's fallen human creature which otherwise finds herself or himself hopelessly ensnared as the result of bad choices. This story of sacrificial living is the over-arching story within

⁹⁹Paul Fiddes, *Faith in the Centre: Christianity and Culture*, Regent's Study Guides, Vol. 9 (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2001), 108.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 97.

which we need to live.

It must be noted here that the postmodern culture is known for its difficulty with buying into over-arching stories.¹⁰¹ People are more secure believing that the only truth is the truth that works for me, a pragmatic¹⁰² or practical truth.¹⁰³ By denying any ultimate truth, the postmodern mindset damns itself to slavery of the meaner forces of humanity. Paul Fiddes points out, “However, we must also judge the postmodern protest from the standpoint of the revelation in Christ. We notice that it is in fact involved in a contradiction; while it apparently shuns any meta-narratives, any large stories, it adopts at least two for itself. First, the claim that there is no such thing as universal truth is itself a universal theory. Second, it implicitly accepts Nietzsche’s grand story that the will to

¹⁰¹“I have already referred to the postmodernism of Lyotard and other who, for fear of the first (that our beliefs may be wrong), deny the existence of any meta-truth and meta-narratives against which we may test our convictions, and therefore end up in relativism and subjectivism, indeed, in irrationalism” (David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, vol. 16 [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991], 50).

¹⁰²“Not only was belief in Western cultural superiority called into question, but the certainty and absolute nature of science itself was under attack. By the mid-twentieth century, the charge was led by the social scientists who began to apply their theories to an analysis of science itself. Psychologists began to examine the subjective nature of all human knowledge; sociologists showed that science was a community affair, influenced by normal social dynamics; anthropologists placed science into its larger cultural and worldview context; and historians of science showed that our textbook understanding of the nature of science was misplaced. Michael Polanyi’s writings and Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* drew these strands together in their theories that science was not a lineal, cumulative progression of objective knowledge, but a series of subjective, competing paradigms. Old positivist science had received a mortal blow. But where would postpositivist science find its new epistemological foundations?

“For phenomenologists, including many psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, and for Kuhn himself, the answer was instrumentalism. Since we could no longer show that one theory or paradigm or culture was better than another, we could no longer speak of absolutes or truth. At best, we could appeal to pragmatism. Any paradigm was adequate so long as it solved the problems humans faced” (Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 83-84).

¹⁰³Bosch comments on the Enlightenment approach of seeking objective and absolute truth: “Today most disciplines, including the natural sciences, concede—albeit grudgingly at times—that this view was based on an illusion, that there is no such thing as complete objectivity, and that a host of factors codetermine our convictions. The problem is, however, that most of the people in our streets, offices, factories, and schools do not seem to be aware of the monumental shift that has taken place during the past thirty years or so. They still live and act as if the tenets of scientific objectivity are completely intact and indisputable” (Bosch, *Believing in the Future*, 48).

power lies beneath the surface of *all* large-scale stories, that the cycle of violence is inevitable.”¹⁰⁴ As the postmodern rejection of the grand narrative leads to a sense of loss and lostness, the deep and fulfilling story that grows out of the offering of a cup of cold water in the name of a God who cared enough to die as lived out in smaller, yet just as meaningful versions of the sacrificial story will alone ring true.

If part of postmodernity is the belief that all grand stories are just means to power and ultimately violence, violence must be fought. We fight fire with fire, and we get burned. We have bought into violence as a solution, whether in grand story or minor incident. ‘Road rage’ is the byword of the day. Ridiculous, self-directed violence will drive a movie to the number one spot at the box office.¹⁰⁵ The *Discovery Kids* computer-animated Saturday morning educational program shows what might have been during prehistoric epics, with a dominant emphasis on animals’ killing and eating, blood and gore included. Fistfights captured on videotape are best sellers in the Internet entertainment business.

This may be why so many in the United States are enthralled by the story of the hero or heroine who jumps in to save the day, beating all odds, and overcoming the unjust and predatory villain, fighting violence with violence.¹⁰⁶ In some ways, the rapture-myth worldview turns God into just that kind of hero. Finally it is payback time, and OUR God is going to come to the rescue. A selfish and comfortable worldview places some Christians in a position where they cannot even wait for Judgment Day. They instead feel

¹⁰⁴Fiddes, *Faith in the Centre*, 86.

¹⁰⁵Jeff Tremaine et. al, *Jackass: The Movie* (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2002), 87 minutes.

¹⁰⁶None of this is by any means new. A cartoon classic just today depicted Pluto’s “angel” casting off his wings and halo to haul off and belt his “devil” out of the picture, since more platonic methods weren’t working in his attempts to influence Pluto to do the right thing.

they need to move the clocks back seven years and exit all Christians from the scene so that God can get a head start meting out painful suffering and tribulation to the wicked, as if the wicked people living in the last days are somehow more wicked than the wicked all throughout history and therefore must be punished more thoroughly. The rapture myth perpetuates this kind of violent escapism in opposition to the kingdom imperative that demands a tenacious loyalty to those living in separation from God, though it may ultimately end in personal suffering, loss, or death.

An example of the pervasiveness of this thinking among Christians in the United States would be the fact that on the very day I wrote this chapter, while visiting a local high school to eat lunch with some of my students, one young lady, at no leading from me, initiated a discussion about a persuasive speech she intends to give in class about “The Rapture.” In addition, she referred to a conversation on this subject during which one of her Christian peers commented in regards to the punishment of non-Christians at Jesus’ second coming by saying, “They have it coming!” and “What do I care? I will not be there!”

One danger in holding an eschatology of violence and escapism is that branches of the Church that do so may end up like Tertullian, who “seems to delight in his vision of the last judgment, when the illustrious monarchs who had been deified by men, the wise men of the world, the philosopher, poets, and tragedians, along with the play-actors and wrestlers, will groan in the lowest darkness or be tossed in the fiery billows, while the carpenter’s son they despised is exalted in glory.”¹⁰⁷ This perspective seems almost to be a derivative of purgatory, an earth-hell, a pre-hell hell for the damned during which

¹⁰⁷H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York, NY: Harper Torchback, 1975), 55.

they might have one last chance to make things right and claw their way into heaven by the skin of their guillotined necks. It is a definitely a place for people to stew in their own juices.¹⁰⁸ One problem with this eschatological worldview is that it is based on the ideas that have continued to drive the predominant spirit of the culture, one of self-indulgence rather than selfless sacrifice. It may be a throwback to the days of the Great Awakening:

The awakening spirit did display itself in many forms, among which there were often sharp disagreements. Yet there was a pervasive sense among the awakeners and those whom they influenced that the future belonged to them and their way. They felt they were witnesses to the coming of the millennium, which God would bring to fulfillment in the not too distant future. Edwards called for a union of Christian people “visibly to unity” in prayer for “that common prosperity and advancement that is so unspeakably great and glorious, which God hath so abundantly promised to fulfill in the latter days.”¹⁰⁹

The very phenomena proposed by an eschatology of the violent overthrow of evil persons and systems, a world without Christians to share the good news of deliverance through Jesus Christ, will be an increasing reality as a result of this self-fulfilling prophecy. We already see this well on its way as the Western church refuses to recognize that the culture no longer gives it a relevant position, that it has already been relegated to the margins of society, a direct result of the rebellion of the Western church against Jesus’ example and its disobedience to the commands of Jesus to be missional, to go out and gather the perishing in from the highways and by-ways,¹¹⁰ who in many cases are more open to God’s invitation than are church people.

¹⁰⁸If you don’t believe this mindset is plentiful, simply Google search “rapture” and begin thumbing through the sites and reading the blog discussions on this topic, or better yet, personally bring up the topic with United States Christians and see where they stand on this issue. Check out <www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/02/05/60minutes/main598218.shtml> for a 60 Minutes transcript of their 8 February 2004 show on the topic. “Perhaps Forcing God’s Hand: Why Millions Pray for a Quick Rapture and the Destruction of Planet Earth” by Grace Halsell would be informative, though I haven’t read it.

¹⁰⁹Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1971), 20.

¹¹⁰Matthew 9:35-38; 22:1-10; 28:18-20; Mark 16:14-16; Luke 14:16-24; John 4:1-43.

Instead of embracing the culture's enthrallment with comfort and luxury, protected by violent heroes, the Church should stand united with her sacrificial Lord, crucifying self for the sake of others, countering the predominant spirit with non-violent, aggressive, intentional actions of help, namely sacrifice for the poor and suffering in whatever form God brings them.¹¹¹

According to Paul Fiddes, the predominant movement of modern culture focused on the domination of the world through human industry and technology causing a spirit of protest to rise up against the dehumanization this caused and continues to cause. They further state that Christianity should meet culture, challenging the predominant spirit and answering the questions of the spirit of protest. Instead, it appears that the Church in the United States has been content to move indoors, retreating to worship inside its bastions of walled-in protection, privatizing faith and effectively removing the body of Jesus Christ from the world that so desperately needs its sacrificial heroism.¹¹²

Of course, God is still at work; God seems to have been directing culture by

¹¹¹"Perhaps the theologian who has thought most carefully in this century about culture and revelation is a contemporary of T.S. Eliot, Paul Tillich. Writing in the 1950s, he suggested that if we gave our attention to the culture around us we would find three features. First there was the *predominant movement* of the culture, which he identified as the spirit of industry, or management of society through technology. Second, however, there could be discerned a *spirit of protest* against the main spirit; this he found to be a powerful expression of the human predicament of estrangement, and existential sense of being alienated from the works of our hands and from the very roots of our being, an anxiety about the threat of non-being. Third, this protest took the form of *prophetic voices*, raised on behalf of particular issues.

Tillich did not stop with analysis of culture, but went on to suggest the way that faith came into interaction with it. Christianity should meet culture, he believed, with the symbols of faith, and especially the picture of the Christ. Religion is about our ultimate concerns, what finally matters to us; with the help of revelation, it can give answers to the questions that culture raises when it is in quest of final meaning. So the Christian story judges the predominant spirit. It answers the questions raised by the spirit of protest, showing that the answer to a sense of alienation is the healing reality that has been revealed in Christ. With regard to the prophetic voices, it encourages them where they draw attention to what is of ultimate concern, but judges them when they begin to make idols of anything less such as their own survival, for instance" (Fiddes, *Faith in the Centre*, 83-84).

¹¹²David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (Durham, NC: Tseng Information Systems, 2000), 9, 194.

drawing the hearts of people towards a fresh discovery of God. Paul Fiddes continues to make connections between the direction of culture and God's self-revealing nature:

It is because God is always present in the world, in a self-opening to people, that they respond by opening themselves to what is of ultimate importance, even in the form of a quest. So there is revelation in the questions and in the answers; God opens God's own self to human hearts and they respond in questions, protests and prophetic voices. They reach towards the place where God is revealed in focus and fullness, in the story of Jesus. Saying this does not confuse revelation with culture. Culture is always a response to revelation, a reaction to the self-offering of God. And the response may need to be judged as well as encouraged.¹¹³

The postmodern desire to question the validity and authenticity of everything may be God's way of directing humanity to find answers in God where before there had been an overwhelming willingness to find answers only through human efforts and discoveries. The story of escapism that the rapture myth offers is exactly the kind of narrative that the postmodern spirit rises up against. On the other hand, a story of sacrifice, the story of a life lived and given for others, raises questions and hopes that lead to the God of Christianity.

The faulty eschatology of the rapture myth is betrayed by the fact that many people are fed up with a sick, wimpy, purposeless, disobedient, watered-down, lukewarm and self-centered Christianity. They may be at the point of throwing it out all together if they cannot find some of the biblical sense of mission behind it all. People realize that they can get all the comfort they need down at Ma's Diner behind a cup of coffee and a warm bowl of clam chowder and hot plate of prime rib with a baked potato stuffed with the works. Many people who have already subscribed to Christianity are looking for something more substantial, something more missional, something more Christ-like than

¹¹³Fiddes, *Faith in the Centre*, 84.

what the Church in this country has been offering. People want purpose in their lives and in their religion, not just a “because the Bible tells me so” or some shotgun approach. This is affirmed by the great popularity in current United States Christian circles of Rick Warren’s purpose-driven literature.

Troubling to many (and all too often the norm within the Christian realm in our country) is a shoulder-shrugging nonchalance towards personal holiness. Instead of sacrificially pursuing holiness and giving up certain rights or behaviors that being set apart incurs, many Christians here seem to be driven by the same commitment to personal success and comfort that drives the culture at large, embracing self-indulgence that is the opposite of sacrifice.¹¹⁴ While the message of the kingdom of God is that sacrificial living subverts violence, bringing an ultimate end to violence and the need for further sacrifice,¹¹⁵ Christianity in the United States seems instead to model a relatively self-gratifying twist on the Gospel theme. The Church here has converted Christianity from a sacrificial lifestyle (one that entails giving up personal dreams, possessions, and rights for the dreams, possessions, and responsibilities of the kingdom of God) into an eternal benefits package. Transformation of the believer is lost in this process, as is the transformation just such a sacrificial hero is meant to work in the world to defeat violence and evil.¹¹⁶ When biblical Christianity is at its very root and core a sacrificial lifestyle, it is no wonder that so many Christians in this country consider themselves to be spiritual

¹¹⁴Myers, *The American Paradox*, 7.

¹¹⁵Chilton, *Temple of Jesus*, 16.

¹¹⁶Consider, for example, the statement of John Ladd, a survivor and witness to the four chaplains who sacrificed their lives to rescue men in the sinking troop ship *SS Dorchester* during World War II: “It was the finest thing I have ever seen or hope to see this side of heaven” (Myers, *The American Paradox*, 275). Or the bachelor clergyman who risked his possessions, sometimes incurring real losses, in order to share his room and meals with those in need (Howard Guinness, *Sacrifice* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975], 13-14).

failures.¹¹⁷ Paul would agree that self-sacrifice, as opposed to the pursuit of comfort, is the key to a successful and fulfilling Christian walk, “As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”¹¹⁸ It is a ‘left behind, praise God’ mindset and lifestyle that leads to a deep relationship with Christ and a sense of lifelong accomplishment, while the pursuit of self-gratification leaves one empty.

Unfortunately, many Christians have bought into the Western cultural emphasis on personal health and prosperity as ultimate ends. As a result, we focus on ourselves while millions around the world are dying of poverty, oppression, and violence. Health in Scripture is defined, not in terms of personal well-being, but as shalom in loving relationships. It begins when we are reconciled to God and our enemies. It manifests itself in our mutual submission to one another in the church and our self-sacrificing service to others in need. Its fruit is physical and psychological health. To focus on personal well-being and prosperity, rather than on shalom, is to preach a gospel that treats the symptoms but does not cure the illness.¹¹⁹

The comfortable self-emphasis of the escapist worldview threatens the possible loss to the United States Church of a whole generation of postmodern realists, Christians and non-Christians alike, who understand and accept the fact that self-indulgent comfort is not the end all of human existence. These persons may have developed such a loathing for things comfortably self-centered and exclusive that they will turn from the Church in this country in revulsion.¹²⁰ These people, whether they end up “selling their souls” to

¹¹⁷In contrast, Guinness writes, “A practice of regular self-denial and fasting, if carried out in the spirit of humility, will do at least three good things: (1) strengthen our characters, (2) strengthen our bodies and (3) save money for God’s work” (Guinness, *Sacrifice*, 16).

¹¹⁸Romans 8:36-37.

¹¹⁹Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 244.

social reform and global justice or turn their repudiation outward in random acts of violence or merely wither away as they soak in hate and bitterness, all are an incredible loss to the Church, and to a God who wants none to perish.

The rapture-myth worldview is one that is also unnecessarily exclusive. It is presented as some kind of mysterious, secret revelation for the Christian. It makes no sense to the unchurched, non-Christians of society. It does not welcome them into a relationship with God. It presents a very “you versus us” attitude in the face of a gospel that is anything but. While this end-times perspective says, “I cannot wait to leave you and all of your trouble behind!” Christ says with all of the God-being, “I will do anything to rescue you!”

This is not the message United States Christians are sending with an embrace of a cult of comfort, epitomized by the open acceptance of the violent, escapist eschatology of the rapture myth. This is anything but good news to those who do not understand the basic rescue-flavored message of the gospel and it is not acceptable to those who both understand and live out this message. It is instead seen as a drama in which the authors of the play win while the others are doomed to perish.¹²¹

Since the rapture myth is based on faulty assumptions, it has the potential to mislead people from the truth, to become a cult in itself. If it is not already happening, I

¹²⁰It has been estimated that there are currently over 100 million “post-congregational” Christians in the world. These post-congregational Christians profess to follow Christ, but remain uncommitted to organized religion in the form of the local church body.

¹²¹“60 Minutes” did a story on this subject that was broadcast 6 October 2002:
 “Mr. GORENBERG: They don’t love the real Jewish people. They love us as characters in their story, in their play, and that’s not who we are. And we never auditioned for that part, and the play is not one that ends up good for us.
 SIMON: It ends up with salvation for the Christians, for the people who wrote the play, but not for you.
 Mr. GORENBERG: Correct. If you listen to the drama that they are prescri--they’re describing, essentially, it’s a five-act play in which the Jews disappear in the fourth act.” Gershom Gorenberg, “Zion’s Christian Soldiers,” interview by Bob Simon, *60 Minutes* (6 October 2002), CBS Television.

believe there will be cults in the near future that center on the rapture. I do not know if they will call themselves the NLBC (Not-Left-Behind Church) or the Church of the Rapture, but some of the recent popular books on the rapture myth will most certainly be their new bible. Since theology shapes our belief, they will easily err.

Fortunately, not all Christians in this country feel this way, nor have abandoned themselves to be shaped by the story of the cult of comfort. Many live with a ‘left behind, praise God’ mentality. In fact, a discussion has been going on for years relative to the need for us to be missional, to see the United States as a mission field, to be incarnational rather than exclusive. As Paul Fiddes says, “The Christian strategy is not to imagine that we have a point of vantage above or beyond culture, from which to survey other stories. It is rather, as Nicholas Lash puts it, that we are called to tell ‘a more persuasive tale’; it is the power of the story to convince that will judge other stories; we are to ‘out-perform’ them by living by a better story.”¹²²

It is this “better story” that we are called to tell, a story of sacrifice for others in the name of a God who gave and continues to give all in order to draw humanity to God, a story of close Christ-followers who are willing to give up personal comfort and gain in order to fulfill the deeper purposes of the kingdom imperative.¹²³

Without a doubt, Scripture does make it clear that there will be a day of judgment and many will find themselves in a place of eternal torment. That story, however, is not

¹²²Fiddes, *Faith in the Centre*, 87.

¹²³The twentieth century Grand Ideologies, as I have argued earlier, are nothing but ersatz religions and faith systems, as is Enlightenment scientism. But they are also pseudo-religions in that they cannot, in the long run, hold the place that belongs to authentic religion. Genuine religion can therefore help us to become resistant to the lure of ideologies; it can be a means of neutralizing ideologies and of making people insusceptible to delusion and immune to their creeds (:63), for authentic religion is no senseless “waiting for Godot.” Bosch, *Believing in the Future*, 43.

the one we as Christian are called to live. If we do, we become like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Perhaps we should take counsel in this bit of wisdom: “It is better to be merciful in the name of Buddha than to be cruel in the name of Christ. It is better to become a neighbor with a Samaritan theology than...to desert the beaten victim with a Jewish theology.”¹²⁴ On the same token, Christians are not called to some elitist status where our heritage exempts us from living out our faith in the ditches and thus from getting dirty. The embrace of a violent, escapist worldview over against a sacrificial one by twentieth- and twenty-first century United States Christianity is quite possibly evicting us from the kingdom entirely!

We are not called by Christ to partake in building a kingdom of hell, but in building the kingdom of heaven. We are not to incarnate Satan’s eternal destination of torment, but rather the Christ-follower’s eternal destination of love.¹²⁵ We are not to propagate fear based on a questionable eschatology in lieu of the grand narrative of hope and love of which the Bible informs us is most certain. We are not to live as those who heavy-handedly offer a message of the incarceration hopelessness of a lost soul, but we are to flesh out the story of the incarnational love of God.¹²⁶

We must incarnate our trusting relationship with a loving Creator because, for the

¹²⁴David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality for the Road* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 37.

¹²⁵1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

¹²⁶Frances Kennet describes Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as a woman who lived the incarnational life in her culture in her role as nun in 17th century Mexico. In addition to being “a literary figurehead in modern Mexico, their Shakespeare,” “an inventive theologian, and a proto-feminist,” she held a “protagonistic stance in an age when such courage was rare. Other critics, including Octavio Paz, have seen this as self-obsession, but it was very far from that - it was the *praxis* of a devout woman who believed that her intelligence was part of her ‘divinity’ and that she shared her suffering with Christ, whose wise brows were spiked with thorns. Sor Juana moves away from the more conventional view of the female suffering of her sister nuns as respectfully embodying the silent, humiliated Christ. Her Christ, and her Mary, are active participants in a world of suffering, offering understanding and hope. Sor Juana did not dwell on the diabolic in human nature, but on the creative, redemptive possibilities in all classes of men and women. Fiddes, 169.

most part, the members of our postmodern society simply will not buy into a scare tactic when it comes to religious matters.¹²⁷ As stated by the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization, in its Lausanne Covenant, the Church is God's driving force in evangelism. The Covenant reads: "The Church is at the very centre of God's cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the gospel."¹²⁸ Bruce Nicholls comments based on the Lausanne Covenant when he wrote "True dialogue between Christians and those of other faiths and ideologies begins with the premise of the Christian confessing his faith in Christ."¹²⁹ It is up to us as Christians to bring the message in good faith to a culture of spiritually hungry people through love and care as exemplified in sacrificial living. It is our role as believers to spread the good news about Jesus Christ, the good news that he came not to condemn the world, but to save it.¹³⁰

Accepting Our Role in Sacrifice

Our TV blew up when I was six years old.¹³¹ Dad decided that it would be better for the family if we did not replace it, so we were without a TV until I was a junior in

¹²⁷Finally, we from the West must critique our own modern worldviews and learn from our non-Western churches the central place of relationship in Scripture. We tend to read the Bible through the lens of order. We see salvation primarily as freedom from the punishment of the law, rather than reconciliation with God. We stress the unchanging essence of God, rather than his relational characteristics. The gospel is about relationship, not programs—about relationship with God, one another as Christians, and a lost world. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 145-46.

¹²⁸LCWE 1974 International Congress Report, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, "The Lausanne Covenant" *The Lausanne Committee*, available from <http://www.lausanne.org/Brix?pageID=12891>, accessed 3 February 2006.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 56.

¹³⁰John 3:17.

¹³¹The way we remember it, the news was on, and that particular channel was reporting the explosion of a fuel truck at the time of the TV's demise.

high school. That meant we had all that much more time for outdoor activities and rough-and-tumble playing. We did all the normal activities that boys will do. I remember a phrase that seemed to pop up now and then, especially when we were striving to overcome some new obstacle, climbing a fresh tree, or onto the latest roof, or up another grain elevator at two o'clock in the morning. Invariably it would be something my older brother would say to me: "Hey, do not do it that way! That is the easy man's way!" That meant there was most certainly a more difficult way to overcome the obstacle, one that proved how much tougher or stronger or more clever a person was. The last thing I wanted to do at that point was continue on the previously chosen route. At all costs, I must find a more difficult way to reach the goal. No one was going to accuse me of taking the 'easy man's way'!

As members of the Church in the United States, we must ask ourselves if we have been available to God and God's great kingdom purposes, or if we have taken the 'easy man's way' instead. Have we been willing to set aside the potential material windfall of full participation in a consumerist society in favor of offering answers to the questions the spirit of protest has been raising? Have we as United States Christians put the cross of Christ before our own personal pursuit of comfort? The postmodern spirit, in rebellion against the modern spirit that proclaimed that humans are basically good, instead presumes the worst. The playing field is being leveled by nihilistic tendencies. The hearts and minds of the culture are questioning even as a belief in ultimate truth is floundering. Do we as Christians in this country have what it takes to enter the postmodern world and begin a dialogue that might lead to a new infusion of Christ in our culture? Or will we be satisfied with life in the cult of comfort and simply write off the unreached millions,

seeing them as those who must face the tribulation of a godless, Christian-vacated world in just a few short years? Bruce Nicholls cautions,

Luke's optimism may be naive. Yet in our time, in a society where Christians have real power or access to power, abandoning creation to the forces of darkness would be a premature surrender. The apocalyptic mentality is more dangerous, perhaps, than naive optimism. It is willing to consider the possibility of nuclear holocaust, and its preoccupation with crises of cosmic proportion can conceal the small wounds we regularly inflict upon creation. And even if we possess power, sensing genuine possibilities in our future requires confidence that life makes sense, that the past contains resources for the present, that we can believe in a God who is dependable and can be trusted with our destiny.¹³²

Christians should not be looking for an eschatological myth to rescue us from the demands of the kingdom imperative that the Great Commission lays upon us as affirmed by such passages of Scripture as James 1:27 and Matthew 25:34-40, a requirement to love the social outcast, the stinky, the dirty, the confused, the poor, the strange, the volatile, the lost. If we are in fact to be Christians, we need to have a 'left behind, praise God' perspective. We need to step into the tribulation for the sake of the fallen and wounded and dying souls of humanity, and do so with vigor. "The cross of Christ contradicted many expectations of how God would fulfill his ancient promises, a doctrine of fulfillment which is true to the New Testament will include this less comfortable aspect."¹³³ In order for Christians and churches in the United States to effectively participate in "kingdom come," I believe we are going to have to pursue sacrifice rather than comfort.

Those members of the Church who have subscribed to the rapture myth need to consider seriously if they are going to let the hollow untruths of a warped eschatology

¹³²Nicholls, *Contextualization*, 223.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 253.

choke the life out of the Christian lives we have been offered, awesome lives,¹³⁴ lives of power not just of words,¹³⁵ lives filled with love for God rather than a pursuit of pleasure and self-indulgence,¹³⁶ having the power of godliness, not just its form,¹³⁷ lives of purpose, not only to participate in the love of the God of the universe with all of our being, but to lead others to the same full, rich life.¹³⁸ Will we live with an expectation of escape and violent retribution for all who are unlike us, or will we reject the deceptive power of this flawed worldview and throw ourselves headlong into the Christian project, the kingdom imperative, into an incarnational missionary venture among the restless natives who inhabit our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and communities?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who opted out of the easy man's way and chose to be 'left behind' when he had already been 'raptured,'¹³⁹ and who embraced sacrifice over comfort, wrote the following thoughts from the captivity that led to his eventual execution:

STAGES ON THE WAY TO FREEDOM

Discipline

If you are drawn to seek freedom, learn first of all to discipline yourself and your senses, lest desires and your members lead you hither and thither. Pure and chaste be your body and spirit, totally under control, and obedient, seeking the goal

¹³⁴John 10:10.

¹³⁵1 Corinthians 4:20.

¹³⁶Matthew 6:31-34.

¹³⁷2 Timothy 3:4-5.

¹³⁸Matthew 28:18-20.

¹³⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been wooed with a lecture series to the United States during the early years of Hitler's reign by caring Christian friends who wanted to protect him. When he realized this, he chose to return to Nazi Germany despite their appeals that he stay. He felt he would have no place in the rebuilding of Germany after fascism if he did not do his part to turn the tide during the times of greatest tribulation.

which is set for them. No one experiences the secret of freedom, except by discipline.

Action

Choose and do what is right, not what fancy takes, not weighing the possibilities, but bravely grasping the real, not in the flight of ideas, but only in action is there freedom. Come away from your anxious hesitations into the storm of events, carried by God's command and your faith alone. Then freedom will embrace your spirit with rejoicing.

Suffering

Wondrous is the change. The strong active hands are bound now. Powerless and alone, you see the end of your action. Yet, you breathe a sigh of relief and lay it aside quietly trusting to stronger hands and are content. Only for a moment did you touch the bliss of freedom, then you gave it back to God that he might gloriously fulfill it.

Death

Come now, highest feast on the way to everlasting freedom, death. Lay waste the burdens of chains and walls which confine our earthly bodies and blinded souls, that we see at last what here we could not see. Freedom, we sought you long in discipline, action and suffering. Dying, we recognize you now in the face of God."¹⁴⁰

My desire is that a generation of Christians in this nation begins to sense the vacuum that the pursuit of hedonistic comfort brings to life and the need to rise up as heroes of the postmodern era, heroes like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote, "It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but the participation in the suffering of God in the world."¹⁴¹ The world needs a new story, one of sacrificial heroines and heroes who will champion the cause of the helpless by trading rapture for tribulation through small and large personal sacrifices.¹⁴² The Church in the United States must begin together to cry

¹⁴⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Voices in the Night: The Prison Poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. and trans. by Edwin Robertson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 75-76. Reformatted from poetic form.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 54.

¹⁴²Myers, *American Paradox*, 53.

out against the prevailing cult of self-gratification, “Do not go that way! That is the easy man’s way!”¹⁴³

No Escape

For the Christian, life in relationship with God has no such patronizing illusions to offer. Instead, it offers pain and suffering and hardship, the realities of life on planet earth. It also offers hope in a higher calling, a meaningful existence where trials bring joy because they are not for nothing. Sacrifice is embraced, suffering is shared, justice is pursued, domination is laid aside, manipulation is avoided, and violence is eschewed, just as Christ modeled. “Contextualization is a missiological task. The one supreme missiological model is the Incarnation. Our mission is modeled on his: ‘As the Father has sent me, even so I send you’ (Jn. 20:21).”¹⁴⁴ We are not called as Christians to escape trouble, but to go looking for it, and when we find it to thrust ourselves into it with the hope that our sacrificial involvement will bring a Christ-like resolution. “The God of biblical revelation is not a deist God who passively awaits the final day. He is the God who loves the whole world and calls all men and women to himself in repentance and faith,” Bruce Nicholls writes.¹⁴⁵ This seems to agree with the approach to Christian life H. Richard Niebuhr calls “conversionist.”

For the conversionist, history is the story of God’s mighty deeds and of man’s responses to them. He lives somewhat less “between the times” and somewhat more in the divine “Now” than do his brother Christians. The eschatological future has become for him an eschatological present.

¹⁴³Guinness, *Sacrifice*, 47.

¹⁴⁴Nicholls, *Contextualization*, 66.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 19.

Eternity means for him less the action of God before time and less the life with God after time, and more the presence of God in time. Eternal life is a quality of existence in the here and now. Hence the conversionist is less concerned with conservation of what has been given in creation, less with preparation for what will be given in a final redemption, than with the divine possibility of a present renewal.¹⁴⁶

Although our hearts are set on the hope of eternal glory, our focus should not be on some mythical final escape, but rather on living in such a way that we incarnate the transformational Spirit of Christ who is within us as we intentionally and sacrificially live out our days amongst our fellow humans of culture, embracing their struggle as our own.

The rapture myth both contributes to and explains our determination to pursue personal comfort and excessiveness over against a biblical kingdom lifestyle of sacrifice. We need to resist the rapture myth and what it stands for, or it will continue to be true that this nation's spirituality will only be comfort-deep. Paul Fiddes writes,

The theme of the Christian story is that God shows the nature of true power by giving it away, by being willing freely to submit to the conditions of God's own creation, to take rejection and suffering into the heart of the divine life. God aims to establish covenant with creation through persuasive love and not by force or manipulation. This is the surprising story of the cross of Jesus.

The content of the story, and God's own transmission of it, should shape our own strategy in telling the story. To its shame, the church has sometimes used the weapons of aggression, threat, infusion of guilt and manipulation in its mission. (Women especially have felt this.) God, we might dare to say, has known the pain of having the church use methods which contradict the story itself, and it is the humility of God to endure the anguish this causes.¹⁴⁷

In a postmodern world, there are no boundaries, no limits; everything is up for grabs. And hopelessness abounds. One more person with grand but unrealistic schemes offering comfort and escape will just blend into all the other empty voices. On the other

¹⁴⁶H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1951), 195.

¹⁴⁷Fiddes, *Faith in the Centre*, 92-93.

hand, a solid, biblical eschatology, one that accepts the reality of suffering and allows for Christians not only to experience it, but to welcome it on behalf of others, has integrity and a potential to draw people into the kingdom that the exclusiveness and emptiness of the rapture myth will repel.

True Christ-followers need not shirk the cross in the hopes of escaping trouble. Instead, in agreement with the beautiful words of the classic hymn, *The Old Rugged Cross*, they can don the cross in the hopes that by embracing the pain, suffering, rejection, humiliation, and death that it embodies they will bring the healing and the resurrection glory of the risen Christ to a dark and dying world.

CHAPTER 4

THE AMERICAN DREAM: EFFECTS OF EGOCENTRISM ON THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

They Will Get What They Deserve

What is the root of our United States Christian sub-culture's infatuation with the end times? Why do we long to hasten the return of Christ when we know what will be the final destination for so many of our unbelieving relatives, friends, neighbors? What role does this play in the cult of comfort?

I had a dream almost a decade ago that has stuck with me. I do not profess to be a dreamer of prophetic dreams or one who sees visions from the Lord, yet this one made such a profound impact that I remember it vividly to this day.

In the dream, I remember coming out of the house in which I grew up. It was a big, brick structure, nearly one hundred years old, with a covered front porch that spanned the length of the front of the house. I stepped out of the front door and onto the porch, looking out to the eastern sky. What I saw and felt as the dream unfolded could only be described as rapture, not rapture as some kind of escape from this world, but rather as total exhilaration and elation. I knew immediately what was happening, as the sky before me started to darken like the giant "Nothing" of the movie entitled *The Neverending Story*. The heavens began to open like a black hole and a rapturous light commenced to pour forth. My whole being exulted in the return of Jesus Christ, coming to take His faithful ones home for eternity. And then I paused—in my dream—and reflected. It was a lucid moment, and in the midst of the hallucinatory rush of seeing my

God coming to set things right once and for all, I hesitated. I realized that I was not ready for His return: not because I personally was not right with God, did not welcome Him, did not look forward to Heaven, but because I knew my brother was not. I knew that he was living in rebellion to Jesus, and that the return of Christ would signal the complete and irrevocable condemnation of my brother's soul to eternal judgment. As much as I treasured the thrill of catching a glimpse of the second coming of Christ, I was relieved to see the process reverse, the black hole turn in on itself, the dark sky return to normal, and my brother be given another chance to turn his life over to the God who died to save him.

Is this not the way all Christians should feel? As Leonard Sweet said during a class discussion in August of 2002, "Shouldn't we all WANT to be Universalists? We know we cannot be, but should we not want everyone to make it to heaven just the same?"¹ He was asking if it was right for Christians to relish the fact that some people will never see heaven, but instead will spend eternity forever separated from God in torment. The implication, of course, is that sometimes we do. We do not always live as Jesus suggested we should: "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."² Too often we long for the day when our enemies will "get what they deserve." Too often we forget that Jesus Christ gave himself as the perfect sacrifice to accomplish quite the opposite. An illustration of this comes from Lesslie Newbigin's confrontation of the tendency of the Religious Right to spiritualize its nationalistic causes:

The leaders of this movement, while accepting the biblical doctrine regarding the radical corruption of human nature by sin, in effect exempt

¹Author's paraphrase of a comment made at a Doctor of Ministry event in August, 2002, at Tilikum retreat center in Newberg, Oregon.

²Luke 6:27-28.

themselves as “born-again Christians” from its operation. They identify their own cause unconditionally with the cause of God, regard their critics as agents of Satan, and are apparently prepared to see the human race obliterated in an apocalyptic catastrophe in which the nuclear arsenal of the United States is the instrument of Jesus Christ for the fulfillment of his purpose against the Soviet Union as the citadel of evil... The “Religious Right” uses the name of Jesus to cover the absolute claims of one national tradition.³

By pursuing our own comfortable agendas ahead of sacrificial ones for our fellow human beings, it would be difficult to argue that Christians and churches in the United States have not adversely affected their ability to participate in “kingdom come.” Paul Hiebert claims that our myopia comes from the lack of objectivity any national group has in regards to itself.⁴ We tend to rationalize our own behaviors and demonize those of others, all too often based on cultural misunderstanding or nationalistic arrogance, or both:

Just as we can more clearly see sin in the lives of others, so we can see how the cultural and historical settings of Christians in other lands affect their theology. Conversely, they see the cultural biases of our theology much more clearly than we do. Therefore, we need to see the church as an international hermeneutical community, in which Christians and theologians from different lands check one another’s cultural biases. In the process, there can emerge out of the current diversity a metacultural and metahistorical theology that is largely freed from the influences of specific human contexts. This could benefit Western theology by freeing it from its cultural biases and restoring its prophetic voice in the face of modernity. As Linder and Pierard point out, Western Christianity is in danger of

³Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 116.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas addresses this same problem, though in relation to another issue: “....given the arrogance of most Americans—particularly Christian Americans—I fear that it is quite easy for us to make a terrible mess by trying to tell other people how to get along. Part of the problem, of course, is that being American hides the arrogance of being an American from Americans because we assume, exactly because we are American, we can speak from the position of anyone. America is, after all, the embodiment of an alleged universal culture—that is, Americans believe that given the opportunity to think about it, anyone would want to be like us.” Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 139-40.

becoming a civil religion justifying Western cultural systems.”⁵

Hiebert has the advantage of being an anthropologist, allowing him to compare many cultures to his own and see past the cultural distortion we as deeply imbedded and invested members of our culture often fail to see for ourselves. From this perspective, we in the United States have historically been quick to perceive ourselves as better than others, a fault that carries over into our churches and our Christian identities. According to Robert Handy, this is not a recent problem: “‘The assumption of moral superiority was not something bred of the Revolutionary struggle of 1776 or born with the new republic of 1789’; Charles Sanford has declared, ‘rather, it was already in existence from the early days of settlement, swelling and intensifying the tide of nationalism.’ However much they might disagree on matters of theology and polity, Anglicans and Puritans both exhibited the sense of destiny, of being the chosen people, of special mission.”⁶

As patriotic members of our culture, we Christians in the United States are quick to declare ourselves right and others wrong. In a desire to maintain our position, we have very few qualms about demeaning those on the other side of the argument. The cult of comfort allows us to build up brick walls without windows and thick, stone walls around our compound, shutting out the very world the kingdom calls us to reach.

The American Dream

Bruce L. Shelley describes the progression of the American Dream from the very formation of the embryo of our nation within the womb of The New World. He describes

⁵Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 46.

⁶Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1971), 8.

the Puritans who saw the Dream as creating “a ‘holy commonwealth,’ a biblical society in which the will of God would be done in the state as well as in the church.”⁷

He tells how the Dream transitioned from the desire to see a “holy commonwealth” to that of an “inward, life-changing experience of the grace of God” as a result of the Great Awakening. “The revivalists of the Great Awakening no longer dreamed of creating a holy commonwealth.... by calling for an invisible transformation of the soul, they hoped to shape public thinking and to create... ‘a nation under God.’”⁸

This in turn “provided much of the grass roots energy for the American Revolution and the creation of a new nation.”⁹ The Dream became more republican than biblical. “Jefferson and the other enlightened republicans ‘drew a close connection between the morals of a people and the safety of its government—virtue in the public made it more likely that government would flourish, vice more likely that it would verge toward tyranny.’”¹⁰ Freedom of religion was granted in order to keep the government from imposing religious standards that would in turn undermine the government’s favor among the people. Revivalists welcomed this stand, believing the republican form of government would favor a spread of the gospel.

With the separation of church and state, the door closed forever on the Dream of a “holy commonwealth,” but not on the desire of Christians to influence their nation and culture. Lyman Beecher, in 1835 in his famous sermon “A Plea for the West,” told Christians they “should seize the opportunity...and shape ‘the religious and political

⁷Bruce L. Shelley, *The Gospel and the American Dream* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1989), 48.

⁸*Ibid.*, 50.

⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 52.

destiny of the nation....'He called for the preaching of the gospel, distribution of Bibles, the planting of churches, the establishing of schools, and the reform of American morals."¹¹ The American Dream was still one many Christians envisioned from a perspective influenced by the Bible.

Revivals continued to flourish to influence individuals and the nation, and volunteer societies began to spring up: "Bible societies, sabbath societies, mission societies, temperance societies. 'One thing is becoming daily more evident,' said Beecher in 1830, 'the grand influence' of the church and the triumphs of the last forty years are the result of the 'voluntary association of Christians.'"¹² Bruce Shelley explains that the morality and social resolve of small-town America stood solidly against the forces of selfishness and individuality that might have kept the Dream from becoming a reality.

Shelley goes on to illustrate how the culture shifted even further, and with it the American Dream: "At the dawn of the twentieth century it was obvious that the prevailing cultural influence in American life had shifted from the small towns, dotting the rural countryside, to the burgeoning cities, the new centers of commercial and industrial power. After 1920, when most Americans spoke of the American Dream, they meant personal, material success."¹³ Material possessions and lifestyles once accessible only to the rich and powerful suddenly became available to the lower strata of people through mass production. Motion pictures and television began to shape the mindset of the nation, while the automobile improved mobility and "perspective."

¹¹Ibid., 53, 54.

¹²Ibid., 55.

¹³Ibid., 61.

The Dream Runs Amok

According to Shelley, the American Dream progressed from a biblical dream to a republican dream to an economic dream and currently to a therapeutic dream. Somehow a well-meaning dream for a civilized world of comfort and security and happiness went from being a vision to becoming a cult, the cult of comfort. By embracing this cult, Christians and Churches in the United States have been distracted from the true purposes of the kingdom imperative.

People in the United States are in constant pursuit of happiness. For us, many of the obstacles to this pursuit that much of the world's population faces have effectively been removed. We are prosperous. We have the time, energy, and resources to pursue happiness like no other people or generation has ever had. We often refer to this pursuit of happiness as the American Dream. A generation ago the American Dream could be summed up in a phrase we all heard frequently tossed around. "I want to make the world a better place for my children than it was for me."

Only two decades ago, that still meant something. For me as a small child, it was a rare and immensely pleasurable event when my parents decided to stop at the A&W drive-in on the way home from church services on a Sunday night for root-beer floats. We almost never ate out as a family, even at McDonalds. When Mom and Dad went out for a nice dinner, I only vividly remember tagging along once before the age of eight. Even as the years progressed and we became teens, we rarely ate out more than once every two to three weeks.

We were not allowed to talk about what we wanted when we helped Mom do the shopping at the discount warehouse grocery store, and had little say in what clothes

would be purchased for us. I never remember going to my parents and asking for money for a fun activity, toy, or snack. I was taught to avoid wasting the money I earned on little things so that I could purchase more important items when I really wanted them.

If a particular activity such as pee-wee league baseball required shuffling around, we all carpooled, and when we were old enough to compete in school sports, we rode the activity bus home after practices and games. Most parents just did not have the resources to expend driving about helter-skelter so their children could all ride in the comfort of their own family vehicles.

I am not claiming that my story is everyone's story. I am sure my childhood would be considered that of a filthy rich kid by many in this world. All I am saying is that even twenty years ago there were not a lot of families eating dinner at restaurants every-other night,¹⁴ or parents giving their 15-year-old his or her own car, buying their children \$200 shoes and \$300 personal home-video units for their rooms, and vacationing every-other three-day weekend.¹⁵

Before this paradigm shift, there actually was room in the lives of the majority to "make the world a better place" in a tangible way for their children. The problem with such a progressive dream as making the world a better place for my children is that given time and success, at some point it reaches its logical conclusion. If my parents "make the

¹⁴Americans now eat out as many as 50% of all meals: "It is also important to note that portion sizes are not increasing in a consistent pattern across the board. Rather, the most rapid increase is in the fast food industry, followed by increases in the home, with the lowest increase in portion sizes found in restaurants. Although the exact percentage of meals consumed within the home is debated, the range falls somewhere between 50... and 66 percent.... With such a high percentage of meals eaten in the home, this increase in consumption may be the most alarming" (<http://leda.law.harvard.edu/leda/data/569/Johnson.html>).

¹⁵I have personally witnessed this trend among lower-to-upper-middle class youth and families in over twelve years of experience working directly with them. Farris Hassan, the Florida high-schooler who went to Iraq for a journalism project, reportedly received a \$50,000 Infiniti for his sixteenth birthday (St. Petersburg Times, January 1, 2006, accessed online at http://www.sptimes.com/2006/01/01/State/Not_quite_a_magic_car.shtml).

world a better place” for me and I end up with everything I need, but I decide to “make the world a better place” for my children, they will end up with more than they need. If they choose to follow in my footsteps and dream the same Dream, you can see where this is headed for their children and grandchildren. We used to describe those as “spoiled” who had too much and knew it. Now we look around and see “spoiled” as the norm.

In fact, for many in the United States, we can no longer describe the American Dream as, “I want to make the world a better place for my children than it was for me.” This dream has prevailed long enough to spoil so many children who are now parents and even grandparents that the new American Dream would be better stated, “It is my right to have and do whatever makes me feel the best at this particular time. I want it all and I want it fast, and as long as it does not take away from me and my comfort, I hope it will trickle down to my children so they can be happy too.” Contrast this with David G. Myers’ claim in *The American Paradox* that the 1950’s were the most satisfying times for people living in the United States, despite the fact that even electricity and running water were not available in the majority of homes at that time.

It does not take long with a spoiled worldview before a nation becomes so saturated with people who have all they need but still want and feel like they deserve more, that ‘more and more’ becomes the dominant theme. At the same time the culture tells us we should have to do less and less and less to earn it. People become equally resistant to taking personal risk in order to protect this way of life; risk might result in their being hurt or killed in the process. In fact, a paradox arises: When I am given everything I want, I am less willing to die to preserve it. The converse is also true: The more I have to work for what I have, the more I value it and the more likely I will fight to

preserve it for others. When my own selfish gratification becomes paramount, a cult of comfort takes over. Freedom becomes a catchword for “I deserve everything.” In that case, sacrifice loses its honor and feels cruddy and downright scary to pursue.

Ron Carlson describes circumstances in his own life that demonstrate this phenomenon in his book, *Comatose Christianity*. He tells of a time when he and his wife were overjoyed at having made the sale of some expensive property on which they could no longer rationalize paying such a large mortgage. When they asked how the new buyers could afford the sizable down payment,

They proceeded to share an incredible story of how the wife’s younger brother had recently resigned from life in favor of joining a strict sect of European monks, and in so doing had taken a pledge of obedience, chastity, and poverty. To fulfill the terms of the commitment, he was required to liquidate all his worldly possessions and dispense the revenue as he saw fit. He saw fit to give it to his big sister, who in turn saw fit to purchase our ugly mortgage on the hill, and now everyone is happy.

I thought such stories were from the realm of folklore and a time long ago, and as we sat in amazement listening intently to the fairy tale, my least tactful, but most forthright, son spoke up and clearly expressed the thought that was on all our hearts: “Your brother must really be a weirdo!” A few years ago I would have been mortified by his behavior, but with the arrival of children I have grown accustomed to public humiliation.

However inappropriate the outburst, it hit the bull’s eye in expressing the truth of the situation. By any standard of our Western culture, a man who willingly renounces his worldly belongings in favor of a life of “thinglessness” and discipline is a weirdo. All current social gauges lead one to conclude that this fellow’s elevator was caught between floors. His porch light was on, but no one was home. He simply did not have both oars in the water. Who did he think he was? Did he not recognize that this is the most affluent nation in the history of the world, and in this culture you measure your self-worth and stature by your things and your thrills? This is the land of self-gratification, the pleasure cult, with unlimited amusement. No one in his right mind would consider self-denial and sacrifice as elements of a viable lifestyle; they are considered foreign policy. Either this fellow had gotten into some fermented yogurt, or it was some kind of joke.

It was no joke. He was as real and as sincere as he could be. Despite his questionable theory, the man had freely chosen to turn his back on the

physical pleasures of this world to begin storing up treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust can destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal (Matthew 6:20). Without question, this display of carnal denial represents the antithesis of current cultural thought and practice.¹⁶

Carlson also writes of “protective shelters.” He suggests that we in this country take comfort in the belief that there will be “available sanctuaries” in a time of crisis. His tongue-in-cheek descriptions of ever-widening “havens of rest” challenge those of us in this nation who have become comfortable with the potentially frightening thought that we may just in fact be deluding ourselves.

His words, penned in 1989, are both prophetic and haunting in light of our current world situation: “Thankfully, there is always the government. Welfare pays pretty well, and food stamps spend like the real thing. Uncle Sam will certainly not let you starve, the fire department will always show up on time, Ralph Nader insures your safety, the monetary system is infallible, the Pentagon is invincible, and Old Glory will fly for eternity!”¹⁷

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States bring us to a consciousness that a large portion of the rest of humanity has had for quite some time, the realization that the world, including this country, more often than not is anything but a comfortable, safe, wealthy, powerful, logical, fun, gratifying, healthy place. The media bombards us with the stories of the few heroes of 9/11, predominantly firefighters and rescue personnel, day-by-day heroes who had already committed to risk their lives for the sake of others, while minimizing the pictures caught on camera of the multitudes scattering for what safety they could find. The Twin Towers were attacked in part because they symbolized

¹⁶Ron Carlson, *Comatose Christianity: A Wake-up Call for Christians* (Nashville, TN: Christian Communications, 1989), 82-83.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 152.

our economic strength. We want the American dream embodied in New York's financial district, but we rarely are willing to defend it. We applaud the sacrifices made in the attempt to rescue others, but secretly thank heaven that we were not anywhere around the towers or the Pentagon or Pennsylvania during the attacks. We applaud the attempts our president and our military make to fight the war on terrorism, but balk at actually going to war against a terrorist nation. Is it really worth the risk? We can agree with hunting down a few terrorists to make a point, but (we tell ourselves) we have already sent a strong reminder that you cannot mess with the U.S. Is it really important that we continue to fight against the world's bullies?

That is not a comfortable thought considering how many of them there really are: rebel forces controlling diamond mines in Africa whose soldiers lop off villagers' limbs on a whim; police-run child-prostitute rings in Manila; suicide bombers; Christian-persecuting nations run by Muslims or Communists; nuclear threats such as North Korea. It is refreshing to hear the fifty-fifth president of the United States appealed in his second inaugural speech to the "youngest citizens" with these words: "You have seen that life is fragile, and evil is real, and courage triumphs. Make the choice to serve in a cause larger than your wants, larger than yourself...add not just to the wealth of our country but to its character."¹⁸ And yet, many seem to think that as long as foreign aggressors are not bothering us right here at home, maybe we should put up with their lack of sensitivity to human rights abroad, allegedly in favor of protecting our own rights and comforts here at home. By taking stock in our own comfortable situation, rather than finding ways to

¹⁸George Walker Bush, United States Presidential Inaugural Address, 20 January 2005, 109th Congress, first session (Washington, D.C.: United States Government, 2005).

sacrificially improve the situation of others, Christians and churches in the United States may have missed many opportunities to bring in the kingdom as Christ has intended.

This attitude is not new. Remember the Gulf War? Remember those from the reserve components who were trying to get out of the military as soon as war was declared? After all, they were not in the military to fight, just to earn an extra paycheck each month.

As long as things are comfortable, as long as life is getting better for me than it was for my parents, I am just fine. If not, you will hear me complaining a mile away! Although for countless ages and throughout the world Christians have undergone and continue to experience tribulation, comfortable Christians in the United States have been educated into believing that they are different and will not have to do so. In assessing the current mood of the culture, Paul Hiebert writes,

...Meaning is to be found in self-fulfillment, in the good life here and now. The existential present, not eternity, is of primary importance.

The focus on the self here and now became the dominant theme in Western society during the last decade of the nineteenth century. The traditional Protestant values of salvation, morality, hard work, saving and sacrifice, civic responsibility, and self-denial for the good of others were replaced by a new set of values: personal realization, health, material comfort, immediate gratification and periodic leisure. These, it was believed, could be achieved through buying material goods (largely on credit) and accumulating wealth...

Life owed us comfort, health, happiness, success, prosperity, and intense, ecstatic experiences. Failure, loss of self-worth, and boredom, rather than sin, became the implacable enemies. Therapy, consumption, and miraculous cures were the means of salvation. A new Western religion emerged to offer us meaning based on self-realization, not forgiveness of personal sins and reconciliation with God and others. Self had become god and self-fulfillment our salvation...

This emphasis on self and the present has led to a North American individualism and pragmatism that emphasized short-term, personal problem-solving, rather than ultimate meaning and truth. Self-realization, in one form or another, has become the dominant religion of the West...

This deification of self has made inroads into the church. We hear the

good news that we can have health, wealth, and prosperity here and salvation in the life to come—without suffering, persecution, a cross, or a sense of sin.¹⁹

Since we are inundated with clichés and propaganda in this country’s Christian sub-culture about the United States being a Christian nation and founded on Christian principles by our godly forefathers who made decisions and wrote the Constitution based on biblical standards of right and wrong, we have come to believe that everything our nation has to offer in the guise of “liberty and justice for all” is blessed of God. Paragraph 8.F. of *The Willowbank Report* remarks: “As the church seeks to express its life in local cultural forms, it soon has to face the problem of cultural elements which either are evil or have evil associations. How should the church react to these? Elements which are intrinsically false or evil clearly cannot be assimilated into Christianity without a lapse into syncretism. This is a danger for all churches in all cultures.”²⁰

In every culture there are elements that are sinful, as stated in paragraph 10 of the Lausanne Covenant, “Because man is God’s creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he has fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.”²¹ Bruce Nicholls adds, “The prophetic ministry of the gospel calls for a deculturalization in every culture of the accretions to true faith. From Moses to John the Baptist, the biblical prophets condemned elements of culture which were contrary to the Word of God. At the same time the prophet’s ministry fulfills and re-creates the truths of every culture. The gospel renews and transforms those elements of culture which are true

¹⁹Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 221-24.

²⁰LCWE 1978 Lausanne Occasional Papers Report, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “The Willowbank Report: Consultation on Gospel and Culture” *The Lausanne Committee*, available from <http://community.gospelcom.net/Brix?pageID=14322>, accessed 3 February 2006.

²¹*Ibid.*, 15.

to God's general revelation."²²

As Christians in the United States, we often have trouble separating cultural affluence from our Christianity. It is easy for us to interpret our temporal blessings as affirmation from God of our behaviors, individually and nationally and corporately as local churches. We are thankful for all the good things we have received "from God" but do not always take into account the ripple effect our pursuit of great comfort and amassing material possessions has on the rest of the world. Joel Vestal helps put it into perspective when he says, "Would we be spending our money the way that we do if we were transformed into his likeness?"²³ Would we be building multi-million dollar churches, and putting our churches into debt, putting ourselves personally in debt when billions of the world go without and suffer human need?"²⁴ Perhaps all of our riches are not from God after all; perhaps they are not all the "good and perfect gifts"²⁵ we think they are. As Nicholls reminds us:

Evangelical prophets have usually been strong in rebuking individual and personal sins against God and one's neighbor, but often weak in discerning the nature of social sins such as tribalism and racism, economic monopolies and political blackmail, the misuse of environmental resources and wars of greed. Such sins are often covered up by acceptable social structures, and we have few prophets who speak against them. *The Willowbank Report* states, 'Perhaps the most insidious form of syncretism in the world today is the attempt to mix a privatized gospel of personal forgiveness with a worldly (even demonic) attitude to wealth and power.'²⁶

²²Ibid., 61.

²³2 Corinthians 3:18.

²⁴Joel Vestal, "Spiritual Formation That Leads to Transformation," in *Soularize Convention Workshop 1* (Minneapolis, MN: The Ooze.com Ministries, 22 October 2002).

²⁵James 1:17.

²⁶Nicholls, *Contextualization*, 68.

Like cults that have gone before, we are inclined to see our nation as the new Promised Land. We tend to believe that the reason we have it so well while most of the world suffers is that we are being true to God and are therefore blessed, implying that those who suffer are not as faithful to God. God wants me to be happy and comfortable, we console ourselves. God wants my children to be secure and sheltered and to go to college so they can get a good job with a \$40-\$50K starting salary package. God wants me to be healthy and vibrant and to stay up with the current fashion fads. God wants me to have loads of money so I can pay my bills and have extra for R&R. God wants me to eat well, eat out, and stay thin and trim without all that hard exercise. God wants me to do well at work, prosper, retire early, and travel cross-country in a \$180K motor home.

For these reasons, many Christians in this nation do not think of what our excesses may be costing our neighbors or our human counterparts across the globe. As Hiebert writes,

Unfortunately, many Christians have bought into the Western cultural emphasis on personal health and prosperity as ultimate ends. ... we focus on ourselves while millions around the world are dying of poverty, oppression, and violence. Health in Scripture is defined, not in terms of personal well-being, but as shalom in loving relationships. It begins when we are reconciled to God and our enemies. It manifests itself in our... submission to one another in the church and our self-sacrificing service to others in need. Its fruit is physical and psychological health. To focus on personal well-being and prosperity, rather than on shalom, is to preach a gospel that treats the symptoms but does not cure the illness.²⁷

Unfortunately the abundance in the United States can easily be interpreted as the result of divine favor. With this attitude, we rest well in His blessing. We accept the

²⁷Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 244. Philip Yancey contrasts our values and God's: "Where is God when it hurts?...He has allied Himself with the poor and suffering, establishing a kingdom tilted in their favor, which the rich and powerful often shun" (Philip Yancey, *Where is God When It Hurts?* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977], 182).

capitalistic pressures in the name of the progress they bring and ignore the curse they wind up being for others when taken to their extreme. While we cling to the belief that we are blessed and that we will not have to face tribulation, our selfish lifestyles are arguably the primary cause for the tribulation of countless others across the globe.

Doug Pagitt says,

...I used to really want to be relevant because I thought that...Jesus really sort of needed me to help him sort of get a new marketing image in the world that we live in and, and people have helped me say, “You know what, maybe you need to spend a little time trying to figure out how to be an alternative...to the American Dream. Maybe you need to be an alternative to that which everybody else is starting to find as disgusting as you do...our job of becoming Christian is not to become the ultimate American..., but instead is to turn that in for something else and say that we’re gonna move in an alternative way, ...become something else...”²⁸

We need to put behind us the self-oriented attitude reflected on one church reader board, which read: “Exercise daily. Walk with God.”²⁹ We must trade this attitude for a more biblical and less spiritually fattening one: “Exercise daily. Walk as Jesus walked.”³⁰ The difference is subtle. The former focuses on personal spiritual development; a deeper life through inward commitments and relationship with God. The latter focuses on a balanced approach to living, one that takes into consideration walking into the lives of others who need him as well as walking in personal harmony with God; a deeper life through Christ-centered ministry.³¹ Our focus needs to be less on ourselves and our personal physical and spiritual wants and needs, and more on the needs of those around us who are

²⁸Doug Pagitt, “Definition of a Movement,” in *Soularize Convention First General Session* (Minneapolis, MN: The Ooze.com Ministries, 22 October 2002).

²⁹Canyon Hill Church of the Nazarene, Caldwell, ID, October 2002.

³⁰1 John 2:6.

³¹Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-31.

less fortunate physically and spiritually. If we continue to pursue comfortable living ahead of sacrificial living, we should not be surprised to find that we have adversely affected our ability to be used by God to our greatest potential. If we are to escape the cult of comfort, it only will be because we are intentional about doing so.

Too often churches and Christians stand aloof in a world starving spiritually and physically, unwilling to participate directly in the dilemma for fear of pain, loss, or discomfort. Take the issue of HIV AIDS, for example. Pastor Doug Pagitt spoke these words at the 2002 Soularize Convention opening session:

There are people in this room who have helped something happen, where we can start to understand that the issue of HIV AIDS really matters in this world, and I'm so glad that we're going to have somebody who's gonna take the platform and really have something significant to say about that.

There have been people who have helped me like they have helped Spencer to understand that if we don't get our heads around that, if we don't find some way for the Gospel of Jesus to do it, it's going to become irrelevant to the majority of the world for whom the Gospel is supposed to be the Good News.

And listen. It is not that Paul guy's issue, whether he goes by the name Bono, or not. I'm glad he's into it. I'm glad. That's fine. I'm glad that he can put all of his rock-star mentality and all of his rock-star effort behind it. But the issue of HIV AIDS is not Bono's issue. It is Jesus' issue. And we should not get ourselves all excited because finally a rock star cares about it. We should have been there all along, because Jesus cares about it. And the fact that we haven't shows that we don't know very much and we have to shut up sometimes until we get our house in order.³²

Until the Church in this country finds a way to see clearly the distinctions between the kingdom of God and the dreams of people, we will confuse our blessed position with national pride. Clearly we are blessed. Clearly that blessing puts the United States in a position to help the rest of the world in so many ways. Clearly the Church in this nation must collaborate with the rest of the Christian

³²Pagitt, "Definition of a Movement."

world, and rise to a position where it can see beyond its limited national perspective.

True and faithful communication of the gospel begins with the contextualization of the gospel in the life of the communicator. This takes place through worship and fellowship, through diaconic service and prophetic justice and through evangelistic witness and discipling. Contextualization demands the willing acceptance of the lordship of Christ and joyous servanthood and suffering for others. The church as the people of God is called to take the whole gospel to the whole world, translating it into relevant cultural forms in order to produce the same fruit of love and righteousness that characterized the individuals, families and communities that comprised the early church. The gospel will remain unchanged but the church, in the analogy of rice planting, will share the continuity of the universal body of Christ and the particularity of historic but changing national cultures. The church in the world is called to be a model of the coming kingdom and the preserving salt and piercing light in a world that is corrupt and has lost its way.³³

Only when the Church in the United States becomes compelled to embrace its role as the suffering bride of Christ rather than the blessed heir of temporal glory will it become again the primary conscience of our culture. We must dream a better dream; a godly, scriptural dream that sees fit to include the world in our successes, and that sees fit to include ourselves in the world's tragedies. We must again agree not just in theory, but in action to carry out the dream whispered in our Lord's prayer, "...thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

³³Nicholls, *Contextualization*, 68-69.

CHAPTER 5

NO PAIN, NO GAIN: EFFECTS OF AN AVERSION TO SUFFERING ON THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

To Suffer or Not to Suffer

Catherine Booth, co-founder of the Salvation Army, is quoted as saying, “Bleed if you would bless.”¹ Booth was familiar with living outside the comfort zone for Christ’s sake, and she certainly considered it with high regard. If success is linked to sacrifice, then success is linked to suffering. For this reason, it is important to take a serious look at suffering. In a culture that often avoids suffering and those who suffer, we must take a closer look at our attitudes about pain, loss, and grief, and evaluate how a reluctance to face suffering may disintegrate our availability to God and God’s kingdom imperative.

By all accounts, I am supremely inadequate to the task. I can empathize with others like E. Stanley Jones, who wrote in his 1933 book, *Christ and Human Suffering*, “To write on such a subject is to walk on holy ground, hallowed by the tears and bloodstained footsteps of many a wearied one. To bungle here would be serious... I can write on this subject only on one condition—that you teach me, Father, to walk in this way, and to walk in it with abandon, as I try to unfold it to others.”²

Here I sit in a climate-controlled house, behind a fairly up-to-date computer, typing words on the screen, while living in one of the safest, most comfortable, and well-

¹Paul Rader, address given as college president during the Asbury Theological Seminary chapel service, 22 September 2005.

²E. Stanley Jones, *Christ and Human Suffering* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1933), 9-10.

fed places on earth. My life is a far cry from a world filled with hot days, cold nights, starvation, vermin, disease, paralysis, loneliness, chronic suffering, and death. My personal experience of suffering is miniscule. Having only begun to skim the surface of the world of deep suffering through my reading on the topic by authors such as Joni Eareckson Tada, Philip Yancey, Stanley Hauerwas, John Christiaan Beker, James Dobson, James Brookes, C.S. Lewis, Daniel Smith-Christopher, Edith Margaret Clarkson, Harold Kushner, and Herbert Lockyer, I see all the more how under-qualified I am to make statements about suffering. Yet it is the lot of all humankind to suffer, and though by comparison my sufferings have been small, they have been real and they have been mine. As James Brookes writes, "...none ever had a perfectly smooth voyage to the other side. God had one Son without sin, but not one son without suffering."³ Rabbi Kushner concurs, "No one has the right to say to us, 'Don't feel so bad, other people have it worse.' Each heart knows its own pain, and knows that it has reasons to grieve."⁴ It is my hope that despite the fact that I am a fellow member of a very comfortable culture, I will be able to bring out some insights about the positive nature of an embrace of suffering, and its role in helping Christians in the United States fulfill our calling as close Christ-followers in a hurting world.

It may be helpful to pinpoint some common attitudes about suffering that are antithetical to the biblical model of a Christ-follower and that at the very least set up false expectations that become detrimental to Christian life. By confronting attitudes and expectations that stand in the way of a biblical Christian worldview, and developing a

³James H. Brookes, *The Mystery of Suffering* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Company, 1964), 47.

⁴Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1989), xii.

willingness to accept a ‘no-pain, no-gain’ reality when it comes to the kingdom of God, perhaps we can begin to knock down some of the strongholds of this cult of comfort, at least among Christians in the United States. In a world where suffering is a given and experienced by all to some degree or another, it appears we need a better paradigm, one of preparedness rather than of avoidance, one that embraces sorrow rather than runs from pain. As Philip Yancey suggests,

Jesus’ followers are not insulated from the tragedies of this world, just as He was not. God has never promised that tornados will skip our houses on the way to our pagan neighbors’. Microbes do not flee from Christian bodies. Rather, Peter could say to suffering Christians, “This suffering is all part of the work God has given you. Christ, who suffered for you, is your example. Follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21 LB). The Bible goes further, using phrases I will not attempt to explain such as “partakers in His suffering” and “complete His suffering,” indicating that suffering can be, not a horror to be shed at all costs, but a means of grace to make us more like God.⁵

It is my suspicion that a life spent pursuing comfort, ease, and painlessness is not only not a biblically-based Christian life, but that it is not even a rational, realistic one. As the Dread Pirate Roberts says to Princess Buttercup in *The Princess Bride*, “Life IS pain! Anyone who says differently is selling something.”⁶ In a world filled with suffering such as has been so widely publicized by the media in our nation and abroad as the result of terrorist attacks, war, devastation from tsunamis and hurricanes as most recently experienced from New Orleans to Biloxi to Galveston, how could any of us think to avoid crisis entirely? How could anyone truly believe that with enough material possessions, money, job security, friends, vitamins, fitness clubs, or technology, he or she could actually cheat pain and loss and ultimately death? And yet we seem bound to

⁵Philip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), 162-63.

⁶Rob Reiner, et. al., *The Princess Bride* (Burbank, CA: MGM/UA Home Video, 1998).

convince ourselves it is possible. Robert Wuthnow confronts this self-deceiving way of life: “‘Self-love,’ he [Jonathan Edwards] wrote, causes the person to become ‘little and ignoble’; but the Christian-spirited person lives in such a way that the self ‘is as it were extended and enlarged.’ For Edwards, the problem was not one of loving yourself, seeking your own happiness, or pursuing your own interests. It was, rather, the relative importance one attached to these pursuits over a love of God and neighbor. Emphasizing the latter would help keep the former in perspective. Thinking about the happiness of others would guarantee one’s own happiness, but the reverse was not true.”⁷

When we avoid hardship, then, making it a priority to pursue greater and greater comfort, we may find ourselves with quite the opposite. For many, avoiding suffering becomes the most direct route to discomfort, disease, outright and often chronic pain, and to more than a handful of disappointments over false expectations. Placing the pursuit of comfort high on our “to do” list actually allows Christians less time to participate in the kingdom. The pursuit of comfort demands increasingly more of our time, resources, and energy, decreasing our ability to use these for the fulfilling, eternal agendas of Christ and diminishing our direct involvement in the kingdom of God. This detachment leads to a growing sense of disappointment in our walk with Christ, as well it should. Consider what happened to Abraham’s nephew Lot in Genesis 13, in Joni Eareckson Tada’s words, “Yes, the grass was green, and the Jordan sparkled in the sunlight. But little did Lot know there were some built-in problems to that valley. Strange people with weird customs. Cities full of crime and violence and sexual perversion. Deadly thorns and stinging nettles nestled on the wide, green bosom of the plain. The hidden price tag of Lot’s hot

⁷Robert Wuthnow, *Poor Richard’s Principle: Recovering the American Dream through the Moral Dimension of Work, Business and Money* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 69.

real estate deal—the prime land just outside Sodom and Gomorrah—bore the names of his own family.”⁸

The cult of comfort has its own lethal effects. After all, a life spent relaxing in bed delivers one over to bedsores. Discomfort and suffering, the very things we avoid, can easily become the end result of a life of avoidance played out in the pursuit of personal comfort.

One potentially skewed perspective on suffering is the one that demands miraculous healing. Hiebert addresses this in his discussion of the obsession in some Christian circles in this nation with “signs and wonders:”

Many people want healing, but they are not willing to give up all to follow Christ. Like the rich young ruler, they want the blessings of living with Christ, but they do not want to hear him say, “Sell what you have, and give to the poor, and ...follow me” (Mark 10:21 RSV) or “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:25 RSV). Nor are they happy when Paul reminds them that Christians often are called to bear persecution, including beatings, mutilations, and other physical wounds and that this suffering is an honor (Phil. 1:29). These are not words they want to hear in an age of self-fulfillment. The kingdom of God comes in signs, but one of these signs is suffering for the sake of Christ.⁹

By demanding immediate physical healing and the relief from pain, sickness and dying, we may actually short-circuit what God really intends to accomplish through our suffering.

Rather than an emphasis on how we can embrace suffering in Jesus’ name and trade rapture for tribulation for the sake of others, many Christians in this country espouse an emphasis on discovering personal happiness. On the other hand, it appears

⁸Joni Eareckson Tada, *Glorious Intruder: God’s Presence in Life’s Chaos* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1989), 14.

⁹Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), 237.

from Scripture that the kingdom of God is not just a bed of roses. In fact, Christians cannot be successful by placing their own needs above those of others, or above kingdom principles like humility, forgiveness and love for enemies, sacrifice, and even suffering.¹⁰ Edith Margaret Clarkson recognizes that without pain there is no gain, and suggests that it is only by accepting our sacrificial role in suffering that our pain retains its meaning: “...God is not the author of suffering. He did not intend that mankind should suffer. But because of man’s sin, suffering is now a part of our human heritage. Rather than let it ravage His people in wild and useless waste, God in His economy harnesses suffering and turns it to the perfecting of His own designs. The wise Christian is he who aligns himself with his Creator in His purposes, and so does not suffer in vain.”¹¹

Embracing Suffering

Our culture tends to shy away from death, loss and pain. While the Church should stand against the current of culture where culture is misdirected, I do not believe the Church in this country has led the way in teaching Christians to embrace rather than remove themselves from suffering. As Tada writes,

I blew the dust off an old quote the other day. It was in one of those obscure volumes off the top shelf in a back closet—one that would have never made it on the Christian Bestseller list.

The phrase went like this: The final crown of glory in this world is martyrdom, and the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.

Don’t hear that kind of talk much these days, do we?

It’s not the kind of stuff that draws good ratings on Christian talk shows. That’s one quote you’ll never see stitched in needlepoint in the family room, or inscribed in gold on a greeting card. Not the sort of phrase

¹⁰Romans 12:3, 10; Mark 9:35.

¹¹Edith Margaret Clarkson, *Destined for Glory: The Meaning of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 83.

likely to end up on a tee-shirt or bumper sticker.¹²

In our prayers, worship settings, and publications, we United States Christians clamor for God's blessings. Perhaps as an alternative we should pray for our children, and for ourselves, "God, make our life the hell it needs to be for us to trust and serve you for a lifetime, as well as the heaven it needs to be to know and love you to the fullest!"¹³

I recently read on a church sign, "Faith is not believing God can, faith is believing God will." This left me thinking, "God will what?" Rather than this allusion to the prosperity, health, and well being I can receive if I wish with enough "faith" upon a genie-god, I would suggest that churches in this nation should teach, "Faith is not just believing God can, but faith is believing God even when he does not."

God does not jump in and rescue us every time we face pain, crisis, loss, or disillusionment. His plan is bigger than any one individual. Can we trust God enough to let him be God even when it is uncomfortable for us? As John White writes in the foreword to Edith Margaret Clarkson's *Destined for Glory: The Meaning of Suffering*, "Tragically, we live in a day that measures faith by the absence of suffering and looks to divine miracles as a proof of genuine faith...It is not by miraculous deliverance that our faith grows but by discovering His faithfulness in the midst of our pain."¹⁴

The popularity of the rapture myth which I hear referenced with positive regard at nearly every turn in discussions with Christians around the country illustrates not only our embrace of escapism, as discussed in the last chapter, but also our avoidance of

¹²Tada, *Glorious Intruder*, 40-41.

¹³....crises contain opportunities for progressive change, and fragmentation creates exciting openings and empowering possibilities.... Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2001), 279.

¹⁴Clarkson, *Destined for Glory*, v.

suffering and a desire for a miraculous deliverance.¹⁵ Take for instance, a conversation I had on my front porch with a mature Christian woman, a woman I quote not to demean her in any way because she is the kind of person anyone would want as a mother, grandmother or church member. I gently challenged the authenticity of the pre-tribulation-rapture approach to the end times and she responded, “I just don’t think the Lord’s going to leave us to go through all that tribulation.”

This is a dangerous place for us to live as Christians, far from the ‘no-pain, no-gain’ position Christ expects from us. A suffering-avoidance mindset drives us away from kingdom effectiveness, while an embrace of suffering drives us deep to the heart of the kingdom imperative. Churches that wish to take part in the kingdom of God will have to become groups of people who do not seek personal comfort and security to the exclusion of those suffering outside the encampment.¹⁶ C. Norman Kraus writes, “We are working for kingdom values and goals, not merely church (that is, religious) goals. While these may have a positive relationship, they are not the same. The church is not the kingdom; neither is it in control of the kingdom. The question is rather whether our church programs are effectively representing and promoting the kingdom of God. And on

¹⁵Moreover, the demand on Christians today to appropriate for themselves the peculiar temporal tension of the apocalyptic gospel of the new Testament not only seems illusory but also dangerous, because it directs hope away from not only its present possibilities and strategies in the world but also from its anchorage in God’s “elusive presence” in the present time. Instead it seems to direct hope toward a utopian “never-never land,” the actualization of which continues to be nothing but a history of disappointment and frustration. Johan Christiaan Beker, *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 89.

¹⁶“Borrowing language from de Tocqueville, congregations have become enclosed within their own hearts, with little sense of a public life. Pastors lead congregations that have little sense of a vocation as a people called to lives larger than themselves. So much preaching simply reflects this cultural captivity, calling parishioners to discover a personalized Jesus who acts as a guarantor of inner, personal happiness in a hazardous and dark world. The perilous fragmentation in the larger culture is kept at bay by creating a group of one’s own kind that is baptized with the name ‘community’” (George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996]), 322-23.

the field the question is whether the local churches with which we seek to cooperate are truly empowering people for life in God's kingdom."¹⁷

For some reason Christians in the United States believe we are highly favored among all of humanity, that we are especially privileged, and that we are not to be included in the promise Jesus made to all of his followers, "You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me."¹⁸ We do not welcome his promise, "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man."¹⁹ The comfortable Christian does not want to face the pain and suffering his brothers and sisters have faced throughout the world and down through history. As Larry Hurtado describes,

Whatever one may think personally of the convictions of earliest Christianity, they gripped and moved people to make commitments with far-reaching consequences for them, and for subsequent Christianity as well. To embrace Christian faith in earliest Christianity was to ally oneself with a small, vulnerable religious movement, not with the mighty and venerable (and sometimes oppressive) institution that it became in later centuries. For Jews and Gentiles, such a commitment could jeopardize their relations with their extended families; it almost certainly courted various forms of disapproval, even hostility, from wider social circles. In the second and third centuries in particular, it might mean denunciation to governmental authorities, and the threat of state punishments. For Gentiles, embracing Christian faith certainly meant cutting themselves out of participation in the civic cults and various other facets of the religious environment that functioned so heavily as expressions of social solidarity.²⁰

¹⁷C. Norman Kraus, *An Intrusive Gospel? Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 109.

¹⁸Luke 21:16-17.

¹⁹Luke 6:22.

²⁰Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 652.

Rather than recognize that we have a heritage of suffering that has heralded the revival of nations, too often we hope to offer the blessing without paying the price. We have received the legacy of martyrs and sacrificial matriarchs and patriarchs without participating in their suffering, and we have become spoiled. To top it off, the Church in the United States often preaches and teaches in such a way as to feed this selfish, suffering-avoiding attitude, rather than starve it as it should. Howard Guinness laments,

Gone are the hard sayings of Jesus. Gone is the teaching on sin, self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, judgment, hell. With all its need-meeting emphasis, there is little in the church-growth movement that stands crosswise to the world. Messianic marketing is bringing contemporary evangelicalism perilously close to the liberalism criticized earlier by Richard Niebuhr as “a god without wrath [bringing] men without sin into a Kingdom without judgement [*sic*] through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”²¹

The Church in this country has in many respects bought into the American Dream, as expounded in Chapter Four, and propagated it. No wonder we tend to pursue comfort and avoid suffering at all costs. Clarkson describes how the church encourages this trend: “‘Jesus wants you well’ and ‘God is committed to your happiness’ are themes that in some circles are superseding the biblical call to repentance towards God, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and obedience to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Little heed is paid to the overall teaching of the Scriptures concerning suffering. Usually only a few isolated verses are considered, and those not always in context. Happiness seems to be more important than God’s standards of personal holiness...Miracles are demanded to exorcise every pain.”²²

The promise that is offered to all believers through Jesus’ tribulation, suffering

²¹Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 78.

²²Clarkson, *Destined for Glory*, 94.

and death on the cross is not that we will be raptured when faced with trials. On the contrary, we are promised tribulation. This ‘no-pain, no-gain’ attitude is expressed by James when he tells us to consider trials pure joy.²³ The ‘no-pain, no-gain’ perspective is seen in the Apostle Paul when he exults in being allowed to share in Christ’s suffering.²⁴ None of the apostles looked for ways to escape the cruelty of a pagan world, but rather lived out an austere lifestyle and embraced the cross by actively preaching Christ crucified and by accepting suffering and death and exile as it was meted out to them because of their faith. Countless other Scriptures directly contradict the cult of comfort to which so many Christians in this culture have so wholeheartedly subscribed, urging them instead to trade rapture for tribulation.

A Japanese legend tells of an old man working in his field high above his village on the coast below. As he worked his crops, he sensed that something was wrong and looked out into the ocean. He could see the tide fading away from the beach and in the distance the ocean rising. Quickly he lit his field on fire. The villagers must have thought him insane as he laughed uncontrollably at the sight of them scrambling up the hillside with buckets of water to put out the fire. In the end, however, his sacrifice drew every last person up the mountain to safety as the tsunami crashed in and devastated the entire village. By choosing to walk into a great personal loss, the old man saved everything he truly held dear and his joy was overwhelming.²⁵

Contrast this with the example set by well-known 2004 presidential candidate

²³James 1:2.

²⁴Romans 8:17-18.

²⁵Some background information on this legend can be found at <http://www.jica.go.jp/english/resources/publications/network/200503/20050307.html>

John Edwards. An article in the February 14, 2005 issue of *Newsweek* tells how Edwards plans to work to find ways to help those in poverty. "... he has taken a position as director of the new Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill...As he explains it, the center will study ways to lift people out of poverty. ...The Edwardses have already bought some land out in the country there, where they are looking to build a new house."²⁶

How typical. To help the poor, the plan is to set up a research center and then move out to a comfortable place far from their lives of the poor and the problems they face. In the same way, many Christians and churches in the United States have moved away from the difficulties and issues of their crowded city neighborhoods out into the serenity of the countryside at the outskirts of town. How much more likely would the poor and oppressed really be served and equipped to move forward if, like Christ, those blessed with resources moved into their lives and not away? This is assistance through assimilation, intentional empathy, and an embrace of suffering that offers true hope for the expansion of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

The Apostle Paul's exhortation to Timothy, a Christian he loved as a son, is especially striking when contrasted with the tentative attitude towards suffering of many in this nation, including Christians:

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. ...Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs--he wants to please his commanding officer. Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. ...Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of

²⁶Melinda Henneberger, "Staying in the Game," *Newsweek* (New York, NY), 14 February 2005, 34.

being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.²⁷

This does not sound like the wimpy jargon of a church that offers blessing and comfort at every turn. There are no suggestions of escape or ease, but rather a cold, hard emphasis on endurance in hardship, signing on as a soldier, competing as an athlete, working hard as a farmer, suffering as a chained criminal, dying, enduring, and remaining faithful. This describes an intentional lifestyle of suffering, a willingness not only to face personal pain but also to incur losses for the sake of others.

Although we need not accept suffering as God's original intention for Creation, we cannot deny its continued existence. It is because of suffering that we need strength, and because we need strength that we suffer. This is circular thinking, of course, and well fitting in the setting of a world of vicious cycles. Perhaps suffering was not necessary in Eden, but it has great potential for shaping, transformation, and growth for us in a post-Eden reality. As Clarkson articulates:

Suffering will come to all of us in this life; none can hope to escape it. Christian and non-Christian alike must share in the pain of the universe. But only we who are Christians can know meaning in our pain. We alone, of all sufferers, can suffer in hope of the glory of God. God does not will us to suffer, but He uses the suffering that is ours to reveal Himself to an unbelieving world and to prepare His children for the glory He is preparing for them in Heaven. Meanwhile, the world about us suffers in despair and darkness... We may work with God to allow Him to bring His glory out of our suffering, or we may resist Him and frustrate His purposes for us. In either case, we will suffer, for suffering is the common lot of humanity... May we seek God's grace that we may lose nothing of the glory God has for us in our suffering.²⁸

²⁷2 Timothy 2:1-13.

²⁸Clarkson, *Destined for Glory*, 68-69.

As Joan Chittister writes, “Struggle changes us; it grows us up. It takes the dew off the rose and the gilt off the silver. It turns the fantasies of life into reality. But struggle does more than that. It also gives life depth and vision, insight and understanding, compassion and character. It not only transforms us, it makes us transforming as well.”²⁹ The pursuit of comfort for comfort’s sake dulls our senses while an embrace of suffering sharpens us, making us keen to the needs of a world dying to enter the kingdom of God. Participation in suffering transforms us into Christ-like healers, strengthened by the experience and deepened in our empathy both with the suffering savior and with the agonizing world, as Dr. James Dobson writes:

Let’s bring the adversity principle closer to home. How does it apply to you and me? Could it be that our heavenly Father permits His children to struggle in order to keep us strong? I firmly believe that to be true. That is precisely what James told the Jewish-Christians in the first century: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (James 1:2-3).³⁰

The fact is that God does allow His people to suffer. We can question it, ignore it, try to hide from it, or we can embrace it and trust that God will use it for kingdom purposes with positive results beyond anything we might have imagined. Hiebert argues,

...we need a theology of sickness, injury, suffering, and death. These consequences of sin cannot be divorced from each other. The processes of aging and death are at work in humans from the moment of their conception. The side effects of these processes are sickness and bodily suffering. While God often does heal us by natural and occasionally by extraordinary means, our full deliverance occurs only after death, when we

²⁹ Joan Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 83. She continues, “Then we become equal to the pressures of the world around us. Once we have truly struggled with something that stretches the elastic of the spirit, we are worthy to walk with others in struggle, too. Then we’re ready to listen. Then we’re able to lead. When we know the meaning of what it is to struggle with something in life we become totally human.”

³⁰ Dobson, *When God Doesn’t Make Sense*, 152.

receive our new body. For Christians, death is the final release, for we would not want to live forever in our present world, even in perfect health.

Some today argue that it is God's nature to heal, not to teach us through sickness. To reconcile their position with scriptural teaching regarding suffering, they divorce sickness from bodily injuries suffered in persecution and from death, for the Bible makes clear that the latter are the lot of those who follow Christ (Gal. 5:11; 2 Tim. 3:12; Heb. 11:35-38).

The denial that God can and does use sickness to teach us is hard to maintain on biblical grounds. Paul speaks of his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). Most Bible scholars agree that this was some...bodily affliction or disease. Moreover, Paul refers to colleagues who were not healed (Phil. 2:26-27; 2 Tim. 4:20). Job ...was sick, but God used everything... to bring him to a deeper...more mature faith (Job 42:5-6).

That God does not use sickness is also hard to maintain from Christian experience. Many Christians testify...that it was in times of sickness and suffering that they were drawn closest to Christ and learned important lessons of faith...times when people realize their own vulnerability and their dependence on God. Furthermore, it is hard to believe that God is more concerned about the illness of Christians in ordinary life than in the wounds and injuries of those who are suffering for the sake of Christ. Why should he heal the former and ignore the latter? Unfortunately, a theology that rejects sickness and suffering fits well into our age, with its denial of death and emphasis on positive thinking.³¹

God has allowed suffering for centuries, even among Christians, so why should Christians in the United States believe we will be held higher than the saints who have gone before, who experienced tribulation, torture and death to guarantee the ongoing dissemination of the gospel of Jesus Christ?³² What makes us worthy of a great escape from the world of suffering? Why should we think we will gain without pain? What makes Christians in this country think we are superior to Paul, the greatest Christian missionary ever? After suffering a blinding encounter with God on the road to Damascus, Saul the persecutor is transformed into Paul the missionary. In a vision, the Lord tells a believer named Ananias to go and pray for Paul's healing. Ananias is hesitant, because he

³¹Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 242-43.

³²We Christians in the United States have them and their suffering to thank for the fact that we are not still among the ransacking pagan hordes.

knows what kind of man Paul was, but obeys when God tells him, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles.... I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”³³

What makes us as United States Christians think we can defy the very words of Christ and avoid suffering as close followers of him who was willing to undergo the ultimate suffering for us? “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another.”³⁴

It may only be our arrogance as people of the United States that makes us think we are worthy of greater comfort than our Lord Jesus Christ. As believers in the awesome gift of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, we must come to grips with the biblical truth that our salvation is from sin and spiritual death and eternal torture, not from the effects of sin and physical death and temporal torture. Is it possible for us to stop confusing the American Dream, the ongoing pursuit of personal comfort and happiness, with the gospel message of the Bible? Surely it is, but only through a willingness to embrace the model of the suffering Christ and a commitment to exit the cult of comfort.

Before going further, it is important to deal with the biblical concept of comfort, because there certainly is one. Am I so foolish as to suggest throughout this work that comfort is evil? Do I really promote the idea that Christians should leave their comfort zone, never to return? Do I pretend to avoid comfort at every turn in my own life?

Scripture talks about comfort, perhaps as much as it does about suffering. The

³³Acts 9:15-16.

³⁴Matthew 10:17-24.

emphasis on the comfort of God, however, is different than the emphasis we place on it in our culture's cult of comfort. While we make lifestyle comfort a priority by pursuing all of the ideals mentioned in Chapter One,³⁵ godly comfort is nearly always linked in the Bible with the preexisting suffering, pain and loss that require it.³⁶ While we in the United States seem to pursue comfort at all costs no matter what level of comfort we already enjoy, God offers comfort to those really in need of it, those who are oppressed, poor, sick, dying, or otherwise in crisis. Comfort is the main theme of scriptural references to heaven, and the hope to which the hurting, dying, and destitute turn when all other resources are depleted. Certainly God is a god of comfort. In this fallen world, however, the Christian life is to be a life of sacrifice, offering comfort to others when possible through material blessings and always through shared distress.³⁷ The kingdom of God can be ushered in on earth, as it is in heaven, but only as Christians crucify themselves and embrace the cross and the suffering savior it represents.

As is exemplified throughout this paper in the scriptural references, suffering and sacrifice are the inescapable biblical paradigms of the faithful follower of Christ. It is our joy to suffer that others might be drawn close to the comforting hand of God. Sometimes this comes in the form of the unsolicited suffering of persecution; sometimes it is self-imposed suffering for the sake of forming a relationship with, building empathy with, or contributing to the immediate or long-term betterment of others; and sometimes it is

³⁵Security and safety, wealth and possessions, power and position, an abundance of knowledge, leisure activities, gratifying relationships, health and youth.

³⁶Nowhere in a word search of comfort did I find the scriptures offering comfort for comfort's sake or for comfortability. Comfort is offered in response to grief, loss, sorrow, oppression, etc. A few examples from the seventy results of the search are: Genesis 5:29, 24:67, 37:35; Ruth 2:13; Job 2:11, 42:11; Psalms 23:4; Jeremiah 8:18, 31:13; Lamentations 2:13; Matthew 5:4; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, 7:6. In fact Luke 6:24 seems to seal the deal with its woe to those who are comfortable.

³⁷Romans 12:15.

simply giving up something to which we have become attached in order to meet a need in the life of another. We are called to bring in the kingdom through personal sacrifices that may result in personal pain, loss, and suffering. In contrast to what has often been the case in the United States, we as Christians are called to make a real difference in our culture by working from within it, just as Christ makes a real, transforming difference in our own lives through the renovating and redeeming presence of God's Holy Spirit.³⁸

Christians are to join in the suffering of the world. Without the message of hope we bear, all experiences lose their meaning, whether good or bad. An image in the *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ* exhibition in the National Gallery in London reflects the expectation that Christians will participate in others' suffering:

Ian MacGregor, the Director of the Gallery, commenting on its impact, writes: 'These are [images] that speak to us from whatever distance in time about life and death and suffering, pain, fear, compassion and, most of all, about love and hope.' Reflecting in particular on a Netherlandish sculpture of 'Christ on the cold stone', he says: 'This is Christ as Everyman—an archetype of suffering that speaks as clearly to our secular age as it did 500 years ago....To look at this sculpture is to be reminded—whatever one's view of the nature and teachings of Jesus—that we are all in some measure complicit in the sufferings of each other'. The image is of Christ, abandoned, naked, seated on a stone, awaiting the crucifixion. It does not represent a moment recorded in any of the passion narratives. Thus the working of this tremendous drama within the imagination is so strong that it creates new images, but always of the same timeless face and figure which gave an extraordinary new meaning to the word 'Saviour'.³⁹

Christ knowingly and willingly took on the human suffering of the world, offering an example for all Christians to follow. By demanding that we must be exempted from tribulation by way of our United States Christian birthright to comfort, we deny our role

³⁸ ...the church in sociocultural settings must develop its own theology by applying biblical truth to the day-to-day issues it faces. In India it must struggle with the caste system and poverty; in Africa it must deal with tribalization and polygamy; in China it must wrestle with ancestor veneration; in North America it must responsibly come to terms with secularism, materialism, and affluence in a poverty-ridden world. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 102.

³⁹ Fiddes, *Faith in the Centre*, 112.

in the sufferings of others. By doing so we substantially limit our ability to come to their aid. As Christians in this country, can we at the very least make room in our lives for suffering? Tada refers to this as a ‘deliberate handicap’: “Webster defines *handicap* as ‘any difficulty which is imposed on a superior person so as to hamper or disadvantage him, making that person more equal with others.’ If we use that definition, then Jesus *was* handicapped...The amazing thing is that Christ chose to be handicapped. I can’t think of too many people who would make such a choice. I know I wouldn’t.”⁴⁰ And yet, this is the very model we are to follow. If we claim to be his disciples, must we not follow the lead of Christ, who knowingly and willingly took on the suffering of the world? As Herbert Lockyer bemoans, “Too few of us emulate the example of chosen suffering the cross presents. Paul, John, Peter and others of the early church knew what it was to take their share of suffering for the Gospel, because they did not live before a mirror, but looked out of a window upon a lost world.”⁴¹ By demanding that we must be exempted from tribulation by way of our national Christian heritage and birthright to comfort, we deny our role in the sufferings of others. In doing so we substantially limit our ability to come to their aid. Instead we need to embrace suffering. Instead we need to embrace suffering, or as is becoming a common phrase in the United States Army, at least among National Guard soldiers, we need to “embrace the suck.” Consider the proverb cited by Lockyer, “he who suffers most has most to give.”⁴² At the very least, may we all be capable of coming to an empathetic agreement with Lockyer’s “unknown poet”:

⁴⁰Tada, *Glorious Intruder*, 191.

⁴¹ Herbert Lockyer, *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs* (Old Tappan, NJ: F.H. Revell Company, 1979), 89.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 20.

Humbly I asked of God to give me joy,
 To crown my life with blossoms of delight
 I begged for happiness without alloy,
 Discovering that my pathway should be bright.
 Prayerfully I sought these blessings to attain
 And now I thank Him that He gave me pain,
 For with my pain and sorrow came to me
 A dower of tenderness in act and thought,
 And with the suffering came a sympathy
 And insight that success had never brought.
 Father, I had been foolish and unblest
 If Thou hadst granted me my blind request.⁴³

Nebuchadnezzar in the United States of America

All of this reminds me of the story of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in Israel during the time when Nebuchadnezzar sent his Babylonian forces to Jerusalem to lay siege. Jeremiah was the kind of guy you did not want around if you were a military leader in the middle of a war, because he was always inciting the Israelite army holed up in Jerusalem to lay down their weapons and turn themselves over to the Babylonian army. The Jewish leaders basically considered Jeremiah a traitor, accusing him of working for the Babylonians in return for some favors he would receive once the battle was over.

The fact of the matter was that God had come to Jeremiah and given him a clear message to take to the people and to the leaders: ‘Babylon will destroy this city and take you all captive. You might as well give up the fight, for the Lord your God is no longer fighting for you.’ Israel had turned its back on God and God was using Babylon, evil empire that it was, to correct Israel, and eventually to raise up a faithful remnant who would serve God as they knew they should.

⁴³Ibid., 66-67.

The leaders of Judah were so hardened to God that they could do nothing but find ways to mistreat and torture Jeremiah as the bearer of the message. They refused to listen to God's word to them, snubbing their noses at God and spitting in God's face by persecuting God's servant. God gave a specific message of prophecy to Jeremiah for the Israelite community and its leaders, which Jeremiah had written on a scroll through a scribe. But when the scroll was mentioned to King Jehoiakim, this is what he did:

The king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and Jehudi brought it from the room of Elishama the secretary and read it to the king and all the officials standing beside him. It was the ninth month and the king was sitting in the winter apartment, with a fire burning in the firepot in front of him. Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe's knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire. The king and all his attendants who heard all these words showed no fear, nor did they tear their clothes.

Even though Elnathan, Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them.⁴⁴

Jehoiakim and his henchmen were the leaders God speaks about in Jeremiah 5:12-13: "They have lied about the LORD; they said, 'He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine. The prophets are but wind and the word is not in them; so let what they say be done to them.'" These leaders refused to take seriously the word of God spoken through His prophets, or to believe they would ever face peril or injury. They had an avoidance mindset that did not allow them to accept that they were vulnerable to pain and suffering. After all, they were the leaders of the nation founded by God; harm could befall them? They had drifted so far from a willingness as God's blessed ones to share that blessing with the poor and oppressed, they could not imagine ever losing that blessing. And yet they did. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army broke through the wall, burning the great city of God to the ground, just as the Lord had said.

⁴⁴Jeremiah 36:21-25.

The king and his nobles along with most of the people of the land were hauled off to Babylon where they would remain as exiles. “Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard carried into exile to Babylon the people who remained in the city, along with those who had gone over to him, and the rest of the people. But Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard left behind in the land of Judah some of the poor people, who owned nothing; and at that time he gave them vineyards and fields.”⁴⁵

In these days we could easily come to the conclusion that we are facing a similar situation. Many behaviors condoned and even admired by our society lead us to believe that our nation has turned its back on God. The postmodern culture in which the United States resides has rejected all narratives as ultimately true, including the one that offers redemption through Christ as offered by the God of the universe. The pursuit of unlimited individual happiness and personal freedom has clouded the national landscape and the disaster that looms ahead. Even in the Church in this nation, personal gain is set ahead of Christ-like sacrifice, the willingness to endure pain for the sake of others.

We may not be overrun by some Babylonian horde and dragged off to exile in some faraway land. At the same time, is it not apparent that we as Christians in this country should come to see ourselves as exiles, as foreigners in a strange culture? Rather than being deceived into believing God will not judge a selfish unwillingness to reach out and embrace the oppressed, abandoned, and otherwise suffering, should we not follow Jeremiah’s example and cry out against it, even if it costs us everything? Rather than join in as eager participants in the royal food and wine of the king’s table, should we not look for opportunities to abstain, as Daniel and his companions did, in a situation

⁴⁵Jeremiah 39:9-10.

similar to that of Jeremiah?⁴⁶ Should we not be setting aside our own natural tendencies to pursue personal gain in favor of a more Christ-like and cross-embracing model? This seems to be what Peter is urging us to do: “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”⁴⁷

Consider the example of the heroes of faith, the “great cloud of witnesses” from Hebrews, who most certainly understood that success comes only through sacrifice. They ushered in the kingdom of God with their faithful commitment to sacrifice over comfort:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.⁴⁸

We should not run for the hills or hide away in a convent or hope to be raptured or try to escape in one of a hundred other creative ways.⁴⁹ On the contrary, as the body of Christ, we should be the immune system, the dynamic, aggressive, and intentional system of healing for the body of humanity. Although exiled to a pagan nation, God’s people still bore God’s call to serve the kingdom of God:

⁴⁶Daniel chapter 1.

⁴⁷1 Peter 2:11-12.

⁴⁸Hebrews 11:13-16.

⁴⁹That is not to say that we should not put our hope in the second coming of Jesus the Christ or in life after death forever in heaven, but rather that during our time on earth and as long as we have the resources to do so, we should be looking for ways to use them to comfort those who have none and serve all, rather than always serve self.

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”⁵⁰

Christians have a God-given role in society, even in a society that is thoroughly pagan and flaunts its sin. Christians serve as the conscience of their society, and as catalysts of reconciliation, drawing persons back to God.⁵¹ This is only possible if Christians stay actively sacrificial, accept their role in suffering, and allow themselves to serve a hurting world through their redeemed pain. Caiaphas’ prophetic statement in John 11:50 still rings true today. The suffering and death of one still has the mysterious power to bring about the salvation of an entire nation, while an unwillingness to face suffering and death may very well sound the death knell for the same.⁵²

Nebuchadnezzar already rules America. This is not a reference to any one

⁵⁰Jeremiah 29:4-7.

⁵¹“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

⁵²“Lamb writes of an example of how the investment of just one life, though it results in suffering and fear, can impact a whole culture: ‘After college, I had a studio for two years in an enormous Victorian vicarage in Reading. Being with the priest, Canon Maurice Brunson, who had been exiled after being tortured in South Africa for supporting the liberation of his people through prayer and pastoral oversight, demonstrated to me how Jesus calls us to work for his kingdom. It simply means sacrifice. No other English priest had been able to inspire me to follow Christ—no amount of endless church services as a child would have encouraged me to go forward for ministerial training. This man did. He was broken, depressed, frightened (by the South African police spying on him in Reading), self-indulgent and a sinner, but he loved Christ and he demonstrated his love by laying down his life for Christ’s holy church in South Africa. It is sacrifices such as his which have made South Africa free today. His encouragement given to Steve Biko, Desmond Tutu, Trevor Huddleston and Nelson Mandela formed the backdrop to renewal there and the beginning of my ministry in spiritually depressed England’” (Fiddes, *Faith in the Centre*, 226-27).

governmental leader; no one of our politicians or military leaders is to blame or is necessarily evil. The overwhelming push of the culture has marginalized Christianity in the United States, pushing it to the edges. Like Daniel and his friends, we have been removed from a culture of godliness and thrust into one of perverseness and obscenity like Babylon of old. Do we have what it takes to follow these great heroes into the deafening roar and potentially lethal lions' dens and fiery furnaces of our own Babylon?

I believe as followers of Christ we are to accept, embrace, and allow suffering its guaranteed, albeit temporal place in our lives, that we might be molded by God rather than embittered by circumstances, and that we might be prepared to mourn with those who mourn⁵³ and be valuable members of the expanding kingdom of God on earth. These are not easy words in a modern Babylon, in a culture of "me."

Experts in Suffering

I have not addressed the meaning of suffering in any depth, or even dealt much with the question of why God allows suffering. Many persons far more qualified than I have examined and written valuable insights into these issues. Though I recommend their reading, and feel strongly that Christians need to become experts at suffering, in part by drawing from the great reservoir of material on suffering we have at our disposal, at some point Brookes' words ring true, "All words of human sympathy, however well meant and

⁵³See Romans 12:15. Philip Yancey writes, "We announce His message, work for justice, pray for mercy...and suffer with the sufferers. We are to comfort each other and bring healing; by doing so, we will be recognized as Christ's body and He, the head, will get the glory" (Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* 17).

Kushner adds, "When I lecture on helping people with their sorrow, one of the things I tell people is, 'There will be times when things will be so badly broken, you will be sure there is nothing you can do to fix it, but there is always something you can do, even if it is only sitting with someone and helping her cry, so that she is not left to cry alone'" (Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, xii).

however grateful to the feelings, seem but a mockery of our agony... Why God permits him [Satan] to exist, and gives him a certain latitude and liberty, like a chained dog, is one of the mysteries of sin and suffering, for the solution of which we must wait until the end of days.”⁵⁴

I would ask Christians to consider seeking the Spirit of God’s help in disentangling themselves from any attachment to the cult of comfort, and to embrace instead the reality of suffering in their lives while at the same time accepting the mystery of its temporary hold on their lives. The following Scripture sums up a perspective on suffering that we as comfortable Christians need to ponder at length:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.⁵⁵

Though antithetical to United States culture at large, this worldview is part and parcel of a biblical “no-pain, no-gain” way of life. It almost seems cliché, and yet so necessary, to quote James Brookes: “Surely, if Christians knew the meaning of the trial their faith is called to endure, there would be less hopeless grief when the flames are kindled about them.”⁵⁶ Rather than looking for a profound answer to suffering, we need to embrace life’s difficulties and pain for the sake of others and for the glory of God. Consider the words to this song:

⁵⁴Brookes, *Mystery of Suffering*, 33, 39.

⁵⁵2 Corinthians 1:3-7.

⁵⁶Brookes, *Mystery of Suffering*, 43.

WHY GOD SITS BY

A man asked me the other day
 How God could take his job away
 And let him lose all he held dear
 Security, close friends, career
 For serving God with his whole life
 Had cut him deeply like a knife
 And almost drove away his wife.
 I couldn't form the words
 To explain away his hurts.

You'll get no easy answers here
 No trite clichés to 'make it clear'
 A God with all the power could
 But doesn't always give us good
 And take away the evilness
 Replace with pleasure our distress
 But someday He'll clean up this mess
 'Til then we'll wonder why
 A loving God sits by

How could a loving God be real
 And let me live through this ordeal
 While my attackers walk from jail
 I daily, nightly live this hell
 An innocent, defenseless girl
 She told how they destroyed her world
 The swine had trampled on the pearl
 I don't have much to say
 To take her pain away

You'll get no easy answers here
 No trite clichés to 'make it clear'
 A God with all the power can
 But doesn't always show His plan
 And take away the evilness
 Replace with laughter our distress
 But someday He'll clean up this mess
 'Til then we'll wonder why
 A loving God sits by

You'll get no easy answers here
 No trite clichés to 'make it clear'
 A God with all the power might
 But doesn't change the dark to light

And take away the evilness
 Replace with comfort our distress
 But someday He'll clean up this mess
 'Til then we'll wonder why
 A loving God sits by

Why would the One who holds it all
 Allow us all so far to fall?
 And while we choose to turn from Him
 And fill the world with hate and sin
 He sacrificed His only Son
 Was spat upon, murdered, undone,
 Gave up His home, His power, His crown
 His actions tell it all
 His death our wake-up call

You'll get no easy answers here
 No trite clichés to 'make it clear'
 A God with all the power may
 But doesn't wipe all tears away
 And take away the evilness
 Replace with blessing our distress
 But someday He'll clean up this mess
 'Til then we'll wonder why
 A loving God would die.⁵⁷

The heart of true joy and comfort comes not as our culture suggests, but in sacrifice, becoming experts of suffering for the sake of others. True living is found in giving. Whether our world consistently lives by this principle or not, at times even the secular culture recognizes the truth in the statement, "It is better to give than to receive."⁵⁸ This is echoed in the familiar words found on an insurance company sign, "Love is not love until you give it away."⁵⁹ Of this Bill Joy writes,

I recently had the good fortune to meet the distinguished author and scholar Jacques Attali, whose book *Lignes d'horizons* (*Millennium*, in the

⁵⁷Raymond W. Leach, "Why God Sits By," Unpublished poem/song.

⁵⁸Acts 20:35.

⁵⁹Affordable Insurance signboard, Caldwell, ID, 19 December 2002.

English translation) helped inspire the Java and Jini approach to the coming age of pervasive computing.... In his new book *Fraternités*, Attali describes how our dreams of utopia have changed over time:

At the dawn of societies, men saw their passage on Earth as nothing more than a labyrinth of pain, at the end of which stood a door leading, via their death, to the company of gods and to *Eternity*. With the Hebrews and then the Greeks, some men dared free themselves from theological demands and dream of an ideal City where *Liberty* would flourish. Others, noting the evolution of the market society, understood that the liberty of some would entail the alienation of others, and they sought *Equality*.

Jacques helped me understand how these three different utopian goals exist in tension in our society today. He goes on to describe a fourth utopia, *Fraternity*, whose foundation is altruism. Fraternity alone associates individual happiness with the happiness of others, affording the promise of self-sustainment.⁶⁰

Certainly if those outside the faith recognize the value of sacrifices made, Christians should lead the way in sacrificial living. I appeal to us as Christians in the United States to begin laying aside our fear of suffering, our too-easy acceptance of an escapist mentality, our infatuation with a warped American Dream, our adoption of wanton consumerism, our general pursuit of comfort and hope for a less sacrificial Christianity. Like Amy Carmichael, missionary to India for fifty-three years who saw everywhere “a chance to die,”⁶¹ Christians in this country must step out of our comfort zones and become missionaries to a post-Christian, postmodern culture with a willingness and determination to be crucified with Christ for the sake of a world he desperately

⁶⁰Joy, 10.

⁶¹Amy Carmichael spent fifty-three years in India setting up orphanages to rescue children from prostitution in Hindu temples and ministering to the people she met. She affected the lives of countless Indians, giving them a hope for a future on earth and in heaven.

While serving in India, Amy received a letter from a young lady who was considering life as a missionary. She (sic) asked Amy, “What is missionary life like?” Amy wrote back saying simply, “Missionary life is a chance to die.” Amy Carmichael, “Amy Carmichael,” *Holy Trinity Lutheran Church* (New Rochelle, NY: Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, n.d.), homepage available from <www.holytrinitynewrochelle.org/yourti18164.html>.

loves.⁶² To those Christians and churches which would truly serve Christ in the kingdom of God remains the job of taking the next step, of trading rapture for tribulation.

⁶²Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 5:14-20.

CHAPTER 6

TRADING RAPTURE FOR TRIBULATION: TOWARD A KINGDOM-DRIVEN CHRISTIANITY

Road Rubber

For too long the cult of comfort has been a driving force in the lives of Christians in the United States. For too long the Church in this country has been more comfort-driven, making it less than kingdom-driven. By pursuing comfortable living ahead of sacrificial living, it is likely that Christians and churches in this culture have adversely affected their ability to participate in “kingdom come.” It is time for the United States Church to get its house in order, to move beyond our culture’s typical self-centeredness as illustrated by our tendencies toward consumerism, escapism, egocentrism and the avoidance of suffering. The Church in the United States needs at the very least to reroute its energy and resources toward things of the kingdom of God; at the very most it needs to get to work and join God in building the kingdom. We need to trade rapture for tribulation. That is the heart cry of this project.

The essence of this worldview cannot be taught through a simple reading, a weekend retreat, or a series of sermons. No traits of a close Christ-follower can ever be imparted merely in these ways. Only through repeated and ongoing attempts at hands-on ministry to others by those who would hope to escape the cult of comfort can these values become assimilated into the thoughts and actions of any one person or local church. Only where the rubber meets the road can the road prove its resilience and the rubber its

effectiveness. Only a life committed to ministry as demonstrated through real-life care over an extended period of time to the needy, poor, oppressed, unloved, imprisoned, confused, orphaned, widowed, abandoned, rejected, abused, or otherwise suffering will truly allow the values suggested in the preceding pages to be taught and caught.

I would suggest the following as a possible course of action to begin implementing this kind of life, and would suggest that Christian readers, especially in the United States, begin to do so immediately, aggressively and assertively trading rapture for tribulation.

Course of Action Outline

TOWARDS BECOMING KINGDOM-DRIVEN

- I. Which needy people am I impacting in Jesus' name?¹
 - A. Personal Evangelism.
 1. List one person in your life who does not have a relationship with Jesus Christ.
 2. Pray for this person daily.
 3. Invite him/her into your life
 - a) Go bowling, shopping, etc. with this person.
 - b) Invite him/her (and family) into your home once a month for cards, dinner, a movie and popcorn.
 - c) Inject your thoughts and feelings about God into the friendship, being sensitive to the person's willingness to listen to you.
 - d) Commit to being available to lead this person closer to God, before and after a first-time commitment to Christ, through mentoring, Bible study, and ongoing a), b), & c).
 4. Consider other persons without Christ who you might add to this ministry over time, without minimizing this current ministry.

¹The needy: the poor, oppressed, unloved, imprisoned, confused, orphaned, widowed, abandoned, rejected, abused, or otherwise suffering.

B. Sacrifice for Life Impact.

1. List one local person (or family) that has tangible and legitimate needs.
2. Pray daily for this person's needs.
3. Find ways to meet this person's needs.
 - a) Take her/him shopping for groceries, pay rent, utilities, offer financial counseling and budgeting skills.
 - b) Invite her/him (and family) into your home for holidays if there are no local family connections.
 - c) Offer every gift in Jesus' name. Do not submit to the temptation to believe that action is enough. Share Christ.

C. Beyond Comfort.

1. List one kind of person to whom you are not comfortable ministering.
 - a) Homeless or imprisoned.
 - b) Different race or culture.
 - c) Different faith.
 - d) Mentally challenged.
 - e) Young or old (inner-city children, isolated elderly).
 - f) Poor or rich.
2. Choose a ministry that involves this kind of person. Pray daily for this ministry, and for ways to step beyond your comfort zone and into their lives.
3. Spend time at least monthly in this ministry, building friendships, and injecting Christ into your conversations.
4. Continue to care in concrete ways long after you think you know whether these persons will change, accept Christ, or in some other way make you more comfortable with them

II. How is my family serving the needy?

A. Family Evangelism.

1. Have each family member list one person in her/his life who does not have a relationship with Jesus Christ.
2. Pray for these persons daily together (before meals, during personal and family devotions, at odd times as they come to mind).

3. Invite these people into your family life.
 - a) Plan a family event and invite these persons as guests. Pay their expenses without any strings attached.
 - b) Invite them into your home once a month for a game night, BBQ, sledding party, etc.
 - c) Encourage family members to inject their thoughts and feelings about God into the friendship, discussing how those conversations went afterwards as a family.
 - d) Commit with your family to be available to lead this person closer to God, before and after a first-time commitment to Christ, through mentoring, Bible study, and ongoing a), b), & c).
4. Challenge family members to consider other persons you might add to this family ministry over time without minimizing this current ministry.

B. Sacrifice for Life Impact.

1. List one family in some less fortunate part of the world that has tangible and legitimate needs.
2. Pray daily for this family's needs.
3. Find ways to meet this family's needs.
 - a) Set aside a consistent amount of money each month for real needs. Find a way to make sure the money makes it directly to the need (pay a bill directly, have a trustworthy missionary deliver food, clothes, pay for education).
 - b) Visit the family on a regular basis, if possible. Coordinate this with a short-term missions trip to use your resources wisely for the kingdom of God.
 - c) Offer every gift in Jesus' name. Do not submit to the temptation to believe that action is enough. Share Christ.

C. Beyond Comfort.

1. Find out what kind of persons to whom each family member is not comfortable ministering.
 - a) Homeless or imprisoned.
 - b) Different race or culture.
 - c) Different faith.
 - d) Mentally challenged.
 - e) Young or old (inner-city children, isolated elderly).
 - f) Poor or rich.

2. Choose a ministry that involves these kinds of persons. Pray daily for this ministry, and for ways to step beyond your comfort zone as a family and into their lives.
3. Spend time at least monthly in this ministry, building friendships, and injecting Christ into your conversations.
4. Continue to care in concrete ways long after you think you know whether these persons will change, accept Christ, or in some other way make your family more comfortable with them.

III. How is my local church impacting real people who are truly needy?

A. Corporate Evangelism.

1. Help with the planning of regular events that are designed specifically with the non-church person in mind.
2. Pray that God will use these events to draw pre-Christians closer to God. Bathe the event in prayer.
3. Invite pre-Christians, specifically ones from I. and II., to participate in these outreach events.
4. Encourage fellow Christians to do the same. Model and challenge them to participation in these outreach events.
5. Participate in evaluation of the event afterwards. Ask three important questions.²
 - a) Were pre-Christians present?
 - b) Was the Gospel of Jesus Christ shared and a challenge given?
 - c) Did anyone draw closer to accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior?

B. Sacrifice for Life Impact.

1. Participate in meeting tangible and legitimate needs through regular giving to the local church. Evaluate the commitment of your local church to such kingdom purposes—do not just throw kingdom resources to the wind in the name of giving them to God. These questions may help.
 - a) How are large proportions of the church income spent?
 - b) Do outreach events and the meeting of legitimate needs capture a significant proportion of those funds?
 - c) Does the church spend more money on itself (buildings,

²Dann Spader, *Sonlife Strategy of Youth Discipleship and Evangelism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute, 1983), 56.

decorations, staff that focus on internal needs) than on others?

2. Pray daily for your church's efforts to meet real needs.
3. Find ways to encourage the church to find and meet real needs. If possible, hold the church to a plan to limit extraneous spending (buildings that are largely unused for most of each week, programs with little kingdom impact, & staff who are simply paid speakers, sit in offices, or waste paid time on less than kingdom-worthy activities: building homes or doing hobbies, or household chores and errands), and concentrate funds on kingdom work.
4. Do not keep funding a church that refuses to participate in the kingdom. There are too many ministries seeking to bring God's kingdom on earth who need God's money. Do not let manipulation from the pulpit or the word "church" on the sign out front make you feel guilty for demanding kingdom use of your tithe and offerings.

C. Beyond Comfort (Acts 1:8).

1. Find out what kinds of persons to whom your church finds it hard to reach out. Find local needs to these persons that church groups can commit to meeting in hands-on ways on at least a monthly basis.
 - a) Prison ministry.
 - b) Nursing-home visitation.
 - c) Mentoring inner-city children.
 - d) Serving an inner-city mission.
 - e) Developing a bar/karaoke ministry.
 - f) Committed families buy up a community housing complex in a poor neighborhood, move in, develop a Christian community lifestyle, and enrich the area by enrolling their children and volunteering in the low-income school, offer ESL classes, etc.
 - g) Challenge your pastor(s) to join the national guard or reserve to minister to persons in the community the church would otherwise never reach, and to stretch the church when these pastors deploy for extended periods of time into the full-time mission field of the military.
2. Find cross-cultural needs that church groups can commit to meeting in hands-on ways on at least a yearly basis.
 - a) Offer an inner-city VBS.
 - b) Plan sporting programs on Native American reservations.

- c) Take part in Habitat For Humanity projects.
 - d) Volunteer for area Special Olympics.
3. Find international needs that church groups can commit to meeting in hands-on ways on a regular basis.
 - a) English camps.
 - b) VBS programs.
 - c) Medical missions.
 - d) Missionary encouragement missions.
 4. Take part in all such missions work with a people-oriented mentality—do not let tasks become more important than people. Commit to ongoing relationships and repeated ministry in specific places, rather than shotgun ministry with no long-lasting involvement with individuals whom you are serving. Maintain contact in between projects and keep these people and groups before the church family for prayer and the meeting of needs. Do all in the name of Jesus—do not settle simply for action—share Christ.

Conclusion

Obviously this outline only offers a few simple ideas on how to stimulate habits of a kingdom lifestyle among individuals, families, and church groups. With a little creativity and application to a specific locale, the sky is the limit. In fact, heaven is the limit. Too often we sink into our own little world and are consumed by problems that revolve completely around us. Whether we are in poverty, middle-class, or among the elite rich, we can obsess about the difficulties of our lives with little regard for others. As this paper has elaborated, this is not how Jesus the Christ has called us to live as Christians. As those committed to be close Christ followers, we realize that the kingdom imperative demands that we daily live out our lives for others. Only as we live out God's purposes in our lives will we have a true sense of success and fulfillment. God's normal action is to advance godly purposes in the world through each one of us, over and above miraculous manipulation. A committed life is one useful to the kingdom of God in ways

that only eternity will measure.

Do not allow yourself or your church to become overwhelmed by the outline. Start small and commit to following through. James tells us that the only religion that is pure and faultless is one that looks after widows and orphans.³ In other words, find people with real needs, people who have been deserted and left to fend for themselves, and help them. Help them physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. Do not become an enabler—demand and assist them to develop their own skills and potential according to a realistic evaluation of the talents with which God has entrusted them. Trade rapture for tribulation and escape the cult of comfort by offering a glass of water to some thirsty soul in Jesus’ name, even when it is uncomfortable or downright painful. Set aside the pursuit of comfortable living, take on a determination to live sacrificially, and prepare to be immersed in the blessings and challenges of “kingdom come.”

³James 1:27.

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