

How America Became Entangled by Materialism

On a drizzly day in June 1978, Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn delivered a riveting commencement address to a crowded audience on Harvard Yard that would shake the foundations of the way Americans thought about themselves.

“When the modern Western states were being formed,” he said, “it was proclaimed as a principle that governments are meant to serve man and that man lives in order to be free and pursue happiness. In the process, however, one psychological detail has been overlooked: *the constant desire to have still more things and a still better life and the struggle to this end imprints many Western faces with worry and even depression, though it is customary to carefully conceal such feelings. This active and tense competition comes to dominate all human thought* and does not in the least open a way to free spiritual development.”

Two years earlier, Francis Schaeffer wrote that the majority of people had adopted two impoverished values: *personal peace* and *affluence*. “Affluence means an overwhelming and ever-increasing prosperity—a life made up of things, things, and more things—a success judged by *an ever-higher level of material abundance*.”

Why are Americans caught up in the constant desire for more and more things?

The material prosperity we enjoy is a modern miracle. In 1950 our homes were one-third their present size, no one had heard of an invention called a “personal computer,” Greyhound was how America traveled, space exploration was an abstract idea, television was an infant, and a millionaire was a rarity. Our progress would make even Solomon burn with envy.

Who would have guessed that, in the 65 short years since the end of the Great Depression (1942) and World War II (1945), America would achieve such a remarkable standard of living—even in the middle of such a devastating recession? Yet, our prosperity has a dark side.

The dominant economic theory in America in our lifetime has been *consumerism*. Webster's Dictionary defines consumerism as: "the economic theory that a progressively greater consumption of goods is beneficial." Is this true? A glance at newspaper ads and TV commercials readily proves that, true or not, the world of commerce diligently applies this theory to their marketing and business plans.

All in all, America is sick. We have a bad case of the "-isms." Standing behind this constant desire for more and more things are a host of addictions to "-isms," such as individualism, hedonism, materialism, relativism, careerism, secularism and materialism. Materialism is buying things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't like.

The American opportunity for prosperity has spun out of control. We have created a nation addicted to *consumption* rather than *production*. Rather than an overriding desire to produce value and make a contribution, we have created a culture that wants the benefits of labor without the obligation to perform it. Richard Weaver says we have observed the extinction of the idea of mission—that men no longer dream of high goals like building a cathedral. The end result is self-pampering and eventually self-disgust, for the ancient truth that labor is therapeutic has been lost. Man's decision to live wholly in this world is evidenced by the worship of comfort rather than making a contribution to the public good.

here is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with consuming. It is elevating consuming and consumption to a philosophy of life that leads to sin. Paul said it best:

“Those who use the things of this world (should live) as though not engrossed with them” (1 Cor. 7:31). While consumption is no sin, it is “pre-sin.” Virtually any good thing can become sinful when carried to the extreme. The Scriptures put it this way: “A little yeast works its way through the whole batch of dough” (1 Cor. 5:6) and “‘Everything is permissible for me’—but not everything is beneficial” (1 Cor. 6:12).

Forces That Encourage Materialism

The constant desire for more and more things is encouraged in social structures. The availability of installment credit, which Daniel Bell calls “the greatest single engine in the destruction of the Protestant work ethic,” has eliminated the need to postpone acquisitions and defer gratification until a time when people can pay with cash they have saved. Today, we can instantly gratify our desires for an ever-growing litany of products, which—according to Madison Avenue—symbolize progress and change.

A fascination with new things creates a restlessness in modern man. Through the structure of advertising the ethic of “sell” constantly bombards us with the newest, most improved gadgets. Madison Avenue pin-stripers have created a phenomenon we might call *psychological obsolescence*. We are made to feel itchy for a new car, even though the one we have had for only three years runs fine.

The advances of technology give Americans “convenience, comfort, speed, hygiene, and abundance” in such proportion that there seems to be little need to look anywhere else for fulfillment, meaning, and purpose. Indeed, we don’t even need to plumb the meaning of death because we can postpone it.

Forces That Encourage This Desire in Philosophy

Previous cultures took it as a task to preserve their culture—its inventions, values, etc. Today, this is almost

seen as a wicked idea. Change, even change for the sake of change, is a virtue. C. S. Lewis said that what one generation called permanence, we now call stagnation. This idea inexorably feeds the desire for more and more things.

An evolution from community to individualism has made us a more anthropocentric culture. Today the manager and the therapist, products of this individualism, define the outlines of American culture. The assumption is that we can manage and fix everything, whether a problem in production or making someone feel good about themselves. We have seen a loss of language that speaks for the public and common good, and of a concern for community. The triumphant language today is that of individualism, a concern for the individual.⁷ This has in turn led to self-centeredness. Selfishness inevitably leads to a desire for more and more things.

Theological Compromise

The constant desire for more and more things has led to a syncretism between materialism and Christianity (if such a thing was possible). People begin to think the purpose of Christianity is to help them become more successful, and that if God loves them He will bless them with a temporal blessing.

In the process, people become cultural Christians, which is to say there is not any marginal difference between the way they order their lifestyles and the way non-believers order theirs. There is a God we want and there is a God who is. They are not the same God.

Cultural Christianity means to seek the God (or gods) we want and not the God who is. It means to want God to be a gentle grandfather type who spoils us and lets us have our own way. It is to live by our own ideas, to be a Christian on our own terms. To be a Cultural Christian is to abandon the first principles of orthodoxy. Whereas Cultural Christians are a community of *orthopathos* concerned for right feelings,

Biblical Christians are a community of *orthodoxy* concerned for right beliefs.

The church, rather than calling people to sacrifice and self-denial, too often ends up catering to the ambitions of its congregation. The church shows men how to be successful but not how to be faithful. Rather than calling men from materialism, "me"ism, and worldly lifestyles, the church becomes the agent of personal fulfillment for men who cannot control their appetite for more and more things.

Individualism in the church, the infatuation with the "new thing," and an insatiable desire for more and more things has caused a segment of the church to refocus on meeting the felt needs of people. Seeker-sensitive services often entertain the mind, but do not engage the soul. The church begins to offer its attendees support rather than salvation, help rather than holiness.

In this process the church becomes worldly. People become consumers of religion instead of worshippers of the most holy God. They come to receive a blessing rather than give God a blessing. They come to be entertained rather than to be broken. The congregation is looked at as an audience to be entertained rather than a flock of sheep to be disciplined.

All this comes from an anthropocentrism fostered by culture, but not expunged by biblical preaching. Instead, the insatiable desire for more and more things is overlooked or, worse, promoted as the essence of how God blesses.

Furthermore, the church has often been too seeker-sensitive by allowing people to remain anonymous without at some point calling them to transition into becoming part of a community of believers. According to Bellah, religious individualism must be transformed by reconnecting it to the public realm.

However, in other ways, the church has not been seeker-sensitive enough. The church has not recognized the confusion

of the average Christian about how to live an intentional, deliberate Christian life. The church has not disciplined men and women how to go “into” the world without becoming worldly.

Deliberate Christian Living

Ministry that is sensitive must simultaneously respond to the survival needs of daily living while at the same time elevate people’s thinking to the higher plane of worship, praise, and thanksgiving.

So how does the church balance appealing to seekers with transforming them? The church needs to *begin* where people live day-to-day. Today the church and culture are so far apart that preaching “bridges” must be constructed that bring people from the world in which they live and struggle into the Holy of Holies, where they can feel a fresh touch from the living God.

To do this effectively, we must *give seekers what they need in the context of what they want*—real needs cloaked in their felt needs. Today people want success. So let’s talk to them about success, but then transition into what constitutes true success from God’s eternal perspective.

Meaningful ministry must call people to right things: surrender, sacrifice, suffering, and service; not to success. It must help people discover their identity and purpose in Christ, not in satisfying worldly ambitions. It must help them discover their spiritual gifts and calling, rather than endorse the pursuit of pleasure. It must help men and women discover God’s will rather than encouraging them to write their own script—a script that invariably includes a constant desire for more and more things.

For the half of our churches that are getting it right, to God be the glory. Enter into His rest. For the other half, God loves you, but he wants you to “repent and do the things you did at first” (Rev. 2:5).

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