

How Christians Can Fight Back Against Culture's Fierce Christmas Materialism

Try, for a moment, to imagine the holiday season without stuff. Eliminate the 300,000 tons of candy purchased for Halloween. Remove 45 million turkeys from the Thanksgiving table. Replant 15 million Christmas trees. Have America put the estimated \$720 billion it will spend between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day back into its proverbial wallet. Just imagine: a holiday without stuff.

It's hard. To say the holidays have become "commercialized" is to oversimplify the situation. Really, what's happened is that stuff has become part of our holiday rituals. We rush Target on Black Friday and fill our Amazon cart to the brim on Cyber Monday. Halloween stores pop up in August, two months before a costume has crossed anyone's mind. We can't conceptualize a Christmas without gifts or a Thanksgiving without a magnificent feast. But it's more than that. The way we participate in the holidays is symptomatic of a larger, thoroughly American problem: overconsumption.

Americans notoriously overbuy and underuse. Only in the past century, with widespread production, higher personal incomes and increased accessibility, has this kind of rampant excess become the norm. The U.S. produces 30 percent of the world's waste. On average, Americans will not eat 40 percent of their food. And this fact is not something you or I can exclude ourselves from. Whether we like it or not, we all accumulate things we don't need or use.

So, back to the holidays. The ideas that I'm bringing up are not new. Flip on ABC Family any night in December and you'll hear Charlie Brown bemoaning how we've strayed from the "real

meaning of Christmas.” And he’s right. However, I’m less interested in questioning what we’ve done to the holidays.

My question is this: What are the holidays, as they exist now, doing to us? And secondly, is there a way to reverse it? Is there a way to celebrate the holidays without excess or waste?

I think there is. To get there, though, we need to talk about minimalism.

I’ve been thinking a lot about stuff recently, in large part because of a documentary called *Minimalism*. The 2015 film follows Joshua Fields Millburn & Ryan Nicodemus, two guys who both found success in the corporate world, were unfulfilled and now, after some drastic life changes, travel the country promoting a minimalist way of living. “Minimalism,” according to their website, The Minimalists, “is a lifestyle that helps people question what things add value to their lives. By clearing the clutter from life’s path, we can all make room for the most important aspects of life: health, relationships, passion, growth and contribution.”

The Minimalists and their ideas have struck a chord with people. Their podcast has received over 40 million downloads. Google “minimalism” and you’ll find countless stories of people on their own “minimalist journeys,” living in tiny houses or purging their closets. Clearly, there’s something intriguing to people about cutting ties with their stuff.

What I found fascinating about this movement, though, was not how revolutionary it is, but how old it is. Nearly every major spiritual leader in history, from Buddha to Jesus to Gandhi, has exemplified and called for a minimalist lifestyle. So did Moses, St. Francis, John Muir, the Mennonites and so many others. “Simplify, simplify!” was Henry David Thoreau’s refrain in *Walden: or, Life in the Woods*. We’re so obsessed with moving toward the future, Thoreau says, accumulating and producing, thinking we’re progressing. But we’re fooling

ourselves. "We do not ride upon the railroad," he writes, "it rides upon us." In the Gospel of Matthew, the rich young man asks how he can enter the kingdom of heaven. "Go, sell all of your possessions," Jesus replies. Simple enough. But so hard.

What we need, and what our holidays desperately need, is a dose of good old-fashioned minimalism. This conversation goes beyond how much money we're spending and how much food we're wasting. It's really about what kind of people we want to be. Philosopher and Quaker Richard B. Gregg, in his terrific essay, "The Value of Voluntary Simplicity," argues that "observance of simplicity is a recognition of the fact that everyone is greatly influenced by his surroundings and all their subtle implications." Translation? Our environment informs who we are. Everything is soul-formation. Thus, simplicity is more than a material issue. It's a matter of moral health. "Voluntary simplicity," Gregg asserts, is ultimately about the "deliberate organization of life for a purpose." If we want to live purposeful lives, we've got to remove the clutter that prevents us from doing so. We have to simplify.

So, you're wondering, what does this look like for this holiday season?

First, recognize that your minimalist journey is your own. There's no blanket decree that I can give. Only you know your stuff. Next, though, think about all of the things that clutter this holiday season, things that we include and do because—well, we always have. But we don't have to. Maybe you don't need to buy wrapping paper; use reusable material. Maybe you can cut back on your ribbon usage (because Americans will use about 38,000 miles of ribbon this Christmas, just so you know). Maybe you can sit down with your family and rethink the way you do gifts. What if you gave experiences—concerts, trips, coupons—instead of things? Or what if you did your shopping at a thrift store? Try to make the most of your Thanksgiving leftovers. Maybe don't make gifts the focal point

of Christmas; do something together instead. Simplify. Simplify. Simplify.

Are the holidays adding value to your life? They should be. If they're not, if they just seem to be adding more stuff to your life and making it even more difficult to appreciate the things that really matter—family, rest, play, God—then it might be time to start thinking about what you can cut. That doesn't mean getting rid of everything. We still need things. But I think the simpler we can make things, the less we waste, the more minimalist we can become, the closer we are to the heart of the holidays.

The most important possessions we can have, Gregg writes, are not material but lie in “intellectual, emotional and spiritual understanding and appreciation.” That's exactly what the holidays, at their core, offer us. The simple things. The important stuff. The story of Christmas, especially, is one of extreme minimalism. The Savior of the world, God incarnate, born in a feeding trough to a teenage girl and a carpenter from Nazareth. It doesn't get simpler than that. And in many ways, that's exactly the point. {eo}

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