

Challenging Consumerism: Prophetic Paradigms From the New Testament

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Abstract: This article argues that New Testament texts about possessions, property and wealth provide prophetic paradigms for consumerism today through the hermeneutic lens of idolatrous greed. New Testament texts are examined in five contexts, each of which generates a paradigm for consumerism: the context of discipleship gives rise to a paradigm of liberation; of community, a cross-shaped paradigm; of the kingdom of God, a paradigm of reversal; of transience, a resurrection paradigm; and of powers a paradigm of disarmament. These paradigms, it is maintained, offer the church a multifaceted, but unequivocally defiant response to the consumer culture that threatens to engulf society today.

A consumer culture establishes its power by persuading people of their need to amass possessions and property. God establishes his kingdom by persuading people of his love for them by giving his Son and releasing the Holy Spirit. Consumerism is about acquiring and possessing. The kingdom of God is about giving and releasing. There seems, therefore, to be an inescapable antithesis between a consumer culture and New Testament teaching about the kingdom of God. Furthermore, in the world of consumerism effective marketing ensures that products are conceived and designed with the explicit purpose of guaranteeing their desirability by the consumer. New Testament texts, however, have a prophetic edge in their commitment to proclaiming the truth with a concomitant disregard for whether or not a message is likely to be positively received by its hearers. With such disjunctions between the consumer culture in which we live and breathe and the biblical narrative which Christians seek to inhabit, finding paradigms that can be drawn from the latter to challenge the former would seem to be of paramount importance.

The first step in such a task is to ascertain whether a hermeneutical line can be drawn between texts about property, possessions and wealth in the New Testament and the phenomenon of consumerism in the 21st century. The characteristics of a consumer culture will be explored briefly, therefore, with a view to evaluating whether a hermeneutical key can be found to connect consumerism today with attitudes to property and possessions in the ancient Greco-Roman world of the New Testament.

The second step and focal task of this article is to examine New Testament texts about property, wealth and possessions and to attempt to draw hermeneutically valid paradigms from them for today's consumer culture. In

order to do this, the texts will be surveyed according to the contexts in which they are located. These include narratives and teaching about discipleship, community, the kingdom of God, transience and powers. References to possessions and wealth from each of these perspectives will be discussed with a view to extrapolating paradigms that prophetically challenge today's consumer culture. Inevitably the choice of texts will be selective and their treatment brief in order to arrive at some conclusions in an article of this length.

*A HERMENEUTICAL KEY BETWEEN CONSUMERISM NOW AND
POSSESSIONS THEN*

While the roots of consumerism can be traced back to the early modernity of the 17th century,¹ there is general agreement that the industrial revolution, the fall of communism and the rise of a free-market economy – with its marriage to democracy – have unleashed consumerism as the pervading culture of our time and the metanarrative in which we live. Indeed, so pervasive is the consumer worldview that religion – and even God himself – has taken on the status of a consumer commodity.² It is vital, therefore, that a hermeneutic of suspicion be exercised in reading New Testament texts about approaches to possessions and property. Luther's dictum that readers must look for the word that comes as 'their adversary'³ is particularly apt.

Although consumerism undoubtedly has to do with acquiring possessions and property, its underlying ideology is more insidious: in a consumerist worldview, what we consume defines our very identity and becomes the meaning and purpose of our lives.⁴ That is to say that the fundamental values of culture are defined by consumerism, not vice versa.⁵ The so-called freedom of a consumer culture is defined by individuals' ability to choose⁶ but this 'freedom' is thwarted by a central and deadly paradox that fuels consumerism: it promises to satisfy our needs but depends on their insatiability to persist.⁷ This latter aspect of consumerism is the most sinister: the victims of a consumer culture are never satisfied and so they are enthralled by a never-ending quest for fulfilment through consumption.

Herein lies the clue to the whereabouts of the hermeneutical key that enables a correspondence to be made between consumerism in the 21st century and

¹ Bartholomew, Craig and Moritz, Thorsten, eds. *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000, 4.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

³ Thiselton, Anthony C. *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980, 319.

⁴ Kavanaugh, John F. *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006, 4.

⁵ Bartholomew and Moritz, *Christ and Consumerism*, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

biblical texts: consumerism relies on greed for its power to enslave its victims, and greed is the overt object of the teachings of both Jesus and the early church. Mark, Matthew and Luke all record Jesus as attacking the scribes and Pharisees for their greed. Matthew couples greed with 'self-indulgence' (Mt 23:25), and Jesus, according to Luke, warns people of 'all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions' (Lk 12:15). God and money are described by Jesus as rival masters which are mutually exclusive (Mt 6:24; Lk 6:13). Singling greed out from among the vices Paul unequivocally equates it with idolatry (Col 3:5, Eph 5:5). Idolatrous greed is the commonality that permits paradigms to be drawn from New Testament attitudes to possessions and property that challenge 21st century consumerism.

CONSUMERISM AND DISCIPLESHIP: A LIBERATION PARADIGM

The New Testament contains narratives about the call to discipleship, teaching about the life of discipleship and instructions about the task of discipleship. The relevant texts reveal that attitudes to possessions and property have a significant bearing on each of these aspects of discipleship.

Early in the gospels the reader is confronted with the accounts of Jesus calling the first disciples. Matthew and Mark note that the disciples left their fishing nets, their boat and their father in order to follow Jesus (Mt 4:20,22; Mk 1:18,20), while, according to Luke, Simon, the sons of Zebedee and Levi left 'everything' (Lk 5:11, 28). Although scholars debate whether, in the case of Levi, 'everything' included his house,⁸ there is no doubt that the disciples responded to Jesus' call with a radical renunciation of their work, possessions and even family.

Luke recounts how meeting Jesus resulted in Zacchaeus divesting himself of half of his possessions and making generous restitution to those he had cheated (Lk 19:2-10). All three synoptic gospels tell the contrasting story of the rich young man whom Jesus challenged to give his possessions to the poor in order to follow him (Mt 19:16-30 and par.), but only Luke records what appears to be a general maxim about giving up everything in order to be Jesus' disciple (Lk 14:33) in line with what is seen as his general 'solicitude for the poor and oppressed.'⁹

These accounts point to a spontaneous and joyful relinquishment of vocation and possessions by those who respond to Jesus' call to follow. The parables of the pearl and the treasure (Mt 13:44-46) similarly evoke spontaneity and joy, as does the experience of the new believers in Acts (2:45; 4:32). In none of these positive encounters is there an instruction to give up possessions, rather the act of doing so is depicted as an instinctive, unquestioned consequence of an authentic engagement with Jesus, signalling an unprecedented release from an attachment

⁸ Mealand, David L. *Poverty and Expectation in the Gospels*. London: SPCK, 1980, 77.

⁹ Verhey, Allen. *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984, 92.

to possessions. That such radical liberation can only be achieved by the work of the Holy Spirit is indicated by Jesus' comment following the narrative about the rich young man: 'What is impossible with human beings is possible with God' (Lk 18:27 and par.). Similarly, Luke's first account, in Acts 2, of the believers who share their wealth and possessions, follows the events of Pentecost, and his second, in Acts 4, is situated immediately after a description of a dramatic experience of the Holy Spirit among the believers (Acts 4:31). Fee rightly notes that while possessions have a way of possessing rather than being merely possessed, 'the coming of the Spirit that marked the beginning of the new order had freed [the new people of God] from the need of possessing.'¹⁰

Almost by contrast with this unprompted experience of liberation from possessions that accompanied the call to follow Jesus, New Testament teaching about *maintaining* such freedom in the life of discipleship points to the need for intentional and determined discipline. Luke prefaces the parable of the rich fool with Jesus' warning to 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions,' and follows it with exhortations to exercise faith in the face of anxiety about the material necessities of life (Lk 12:15-34). The same discourse is preceded in Matthew by teaching about earthly treasures and the rival masters, God and money (Mt 6:19-34). According to both Matthew and Luke, Jesus urges his hearers to demonstrate their trust in God by setting their hearts on seeking his kingdom rather than worrying about food and clothing (Mt 6:31-33; Lk 12:29-31).

In the parable of the sower Jesus interprets the fate of the seed that is choked by thorns as the hearer of the word of God for whom 'the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful' (Mk 4:18-19). Unlike the seeds on the path and the rocky places, the plants choked by thorns grow and survive – suggesting an initial commitment to a life of discipleship – but do not bear fruit or mature, because the priority given to possessions and pleasure gain a stranglehold on their life that is incompatible with discipleship.

The teachings of the epistles reinforce the need for disciples to be proactive in resisting the lure of wealth and the temptation to be either anxious or discontented. Combined with freedom from the love of money and trust in God's generous provision 'according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus' (Phil 4:19), contentment is the watchword in the epistles concerning possessions and wealth.¹¹ Resolute trust in the God who provides, therefore, is the hallmark of disciples who are kept free by the Spirit of Christ from unnecessary anxiety about, or undue interest in, possessions and the necessities of life.

The synoptic gospels' accounts of the sending out of the twelve (and, in Luke, also of the seventy-two) appear to corroborate a liberation paradigm for possessions in relation to carrying out the discipleship tasks of preaching

¹⁰ Fee, Gordon D. *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*. Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 2000, 53-54.

¹¹ Phil 4:11-13; 1Tim 6:6-10; Heb 13:5a.

repentance (Mk 6:12) and the kingdom (Mt 10:7, Lk 9:2) and healing the sick. Although there is much discussion among scholars about the significance of the differences in the gospels' lists of possessions that the disciples are to leave behind,¹² the overall thrust of these texts is clear: Schmidt rightly concludes that while Old Testament and rabbinic parallels suggest that holiness and urgency are factors, the overriding purpose of being free from possessions is to place the disciples in a position of total dependence on God through dependence on others.¹³

However, only to consider these texts is to oversimplify the teachings of the New Testament in this regard. The synoptic gospels record that Jesus' ministry was supported by a group of women who gave of their wealth to meet the needs of Jesus and his disciples (Mt 27:55; Mk 15:41; Lk 8:2-3; 10:38). Paul writes on numerous occasions about the rights of apostles to have their needs supplied by those to whom they minister, but then denies himself this right in Corinth and Thessalonica (1 Cor 9; 2 Cor 11:8-9; 12:14; 1 Thess 2:9). Whether disciples are called to rid themselves of possessions or to gain them in order to supply others' needs, the overarching principle is that the task of proclaiming the kingdom of God must be determinative in how the disciples are to exercise their freedom from attachment to, anxiety about, or dependence on possessions and wealth.

CONSUMERISM AND COMMUNITY: A CROSS-SHAPED PARADIGM

Kavanaugh describes how consumerism results in the 'dissolution of mutuality and relationship' because in a consumer culture the objects of love are transferred from humans to things in order to avoid the pain, commitment and vulnerability that loving people involves.¹⁴ Submission to a consumer culture not only makes us unable to relate to others but numbs our sensitivity to their needs so that society becomes divided between those who are able to consume and those who cannot.¹⁵ In a recent report of The Children's Society, Rowan Williams is quoted as saying:

*The selling of lifestyles to children creates a culture of material competitiveness and promotes acquisitive individualism at the expense of the principles of community and cooperation.*¹⁶

¹² See, for example, Schmidt, Thomas E. *Hostility to Wealth in the Synoptic Gospels*. Sheffield: JSOT, 1987, 107-108.

¹³ Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth*, 107.

¹⁴ Kavanaugh, *Following Christ*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4, 9.

¹⁶ The Children's Society, 'Concerns Over Commercialisation of Childhood', *The Children's Society* website (accessed 3 March 2008).

http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/whats_happening/media_office/latest_news/6486_new_s.html)

New Testament teaching turns such a dynamic inside out: it unties the individualistic knot of consumerism by showing how money, possessions and property are used to create community, not destroy it. The crucifixion of Jesus embodies a cross-shaped paradigm of sacrificial generosity that establishes a people who are reconciled to each other and to God.

The authors of the synoptic gospels weave messages about sacrificial giving of possessions (and more) into their narratives. After the encounter with the rich man, for example, the disciples remind Jesus that they had indeed given up everything to follow him (Mt 19:27-30 and par.). It would seem to be no coincidence that this exchange is closely followed by Jesus' prediction of his own suffering, death and resurrection in all three gospels (Mt 20:17-19 and par.). For the followers of Jesus, the grace of God that led to the self-giving of Christ on the cross is a controlling paradigm for their attitude to possessions and property.

In Acts, Luke describes how the life of the earliest believers exemplify such a dynamic: the narrative is infused with an atmosphere of spontaneity and joy as believers share their possessions, property and money, thereby ensuring that no one in the community was needy, and resulting in a positive testimony to the wider community (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35). Although Fee convincingly contends that the authorial intent of such narrative texts was not to establish a normative precedent for the church,¹⁷ the combination of features that characterised this primitive church is nevertheless instructive with regard to attitudes to wealth and possessions. The Holy Spirit caused the believers to be 'one in heart and mind,' to experience great power through the acts and teaching of the apostles and to share their possessions so that 'there were no needy persons among them.' The result of these combined factors - and the selfless sharing of wealth was one of them - was sustained and significant growth. Commenting on this text, Hays argues that

*The metaphorical conjunction between the narrated church of Acts 2 and 4 and the church that we experience unsettles our "commonsense" view of economic reality and calls us to rethink our practices in radical ways.*¹⁸

This is perhaps all the more so in today's 'global village' when wealthy Christians in the one third world can no longer plead ignorance about the poverty and need of many churches in the two thirds world, in the same way that the rich man had no credible defence for his disregard of Lazarus. Indeed, in 2 Cor 8-9 Paul encourages churches in different locations and circumstances to live out their unity by means of compassionate giving. The Corinthian Christians are exhorted to give generously to the churches in Jerusalem which were suffering hardship. He uses the example of the Macedonians: they gave 'themselves first to the Lord' (8:5) and then to the Jerusalem believers so that 'out of the most severe

¹⁷ Fee, Gordon D. and Stuart, Douglas. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Bletchley: Scripture Union, 203, 106.

¹⁸ Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. London: T&T Clark, 1996, 303.

trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity' (8:2). Such an attitude reflects Christ himself, who 'though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (8:9). In other words, the Corinthian believers were exhorted to approach their possessions and money within a cross-shaped paradigm: their relationship with Christ is to be authenticated by sacrificial giving to fellow believers which, in turn, is to result in the strengthening of others' relationship to God through thanksgiving (2 Cor 9:13) and in believers' love for one another (9:14).

In total antithesis to the dynamic of consumerism in which possessions are acquired to achieve self-sufficiency and gain pleasure, Christians are urged to create and strengthen relationships of interdependence by being willing to undergo the pain of sacrifice in giving away possessions and money to meet others' needs. Just as Christ establishes the community of the church through his self-sacrifice on the cross, so his followers are called to use possessions and wealth sacrificially for the purpose of creating relationships leading to unity within and among churches. In so doing both Jesus and his followers serve as channels for the work of the Holy Spirit and signposts to an alternative reality, namely the kingdom of God.

CONSUMERISM AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD: A PARADIGM OF REVERSAL

The synoptic gospels frame much of Jesus' teaching in the context of the nature of the kingdom of God. They are punctuated with riddle-like adages about the kingdom of God that appear to reverse the common sense order of things. 'For he who is least among you all – he is the greatest' (Lk 9:48b), Jesus is recorded as saying regarding status in the kingdom of God. Matthew concludes the sad story of the rich young man who went away when Jesus invited him to sell his possessions and give them to the poor, with 'So the last will be first and the first will be last.' This is repeated after the parable of the workers in the vineyard which immediately follows. Luke records Jesus as saying pointedly to the 'Pharisees who loved money,' 'what is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight' (Lk16:15). Similarly the beatitudes juxtapose blessing with poverty and hunger, and, in Luke's version, woe with wealth and repletion. The author of the letter of James echoes this antithetic thought: 'Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him?' (Jas 2:5b). Such sayings defy any attempt to equate personal value or standing with personal wealth, in direct contradiction to consumer culture for which such an equation is axiomatic.

Similarly, many of the parables that constitute much of Jesus' teaching engage with issues of possessions, property and wealth in relation to the kingdom, employing the 'shock tactics' typical of the genre. The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16), for example, explodes the idea of a fair wage to drive home to the reader that God's lavish generosity characterises his kingdom, not

common sense principles about the value of earnings – either material or moral. Interestingly, Matthew places this parable immediately after the narrative of the rich young ruler upon which Jesus comments, ‘it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven... it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’ (Mt 19:23-24). Fee rightly comments that ‘Jesus’ point is that it takes a miracle for the rich to be saved, because they are secure in their possessions.’¹⁹

The parable of the shrewd manager appears to condone an almost reckless approach to finance (Lk 16:1-15). The manager is praised by the master, and therefore by implication, by Jesus,²⁰ for using his financial acumen to ‘gain friends’ and so, eventually, to ‘be welcomed into eternal dwellings.’ By contrast the rich farmer who appears to exercise sensible management principles to his bumper crops is judged a ‘fool’ by God for his greed (Lk 12:16-21). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is even more trenchant (Lk 16:19-31). In tone and content God’s judgment upon the rich man and his blessing of Lazarus resonate with the words of Jas 5:1-6. The Lukan parables of the tower builder and the warring king conclude with the uncompromising warning for would-be disciples to consider the cost, namely giving up everything, to follow Jesus (Lk 14:33).

It would be too simplistic to conclude that New Testament teaching constitutes a systematic reversal of the values of consumerism, so that possessions and wealth are considered worthless in the kingdom of God. The parables of the shrewd manager and of the talents – which can, of course, be applied to more than just money – suggest that possessions and wealth *gain* value when they are given away and *lose* value when they are acquired and stored. This nuanced paradigm of reversal is further informed by teaching about justice in the kingdom of God. The need to use wealth and possessions to establish justice for the poor is particularly prominent in Luke’s account of the teachings of Jesus and the growth of the early church in Acts. Jesus began his teaching ministry by applying to himself the prophecy from Isaiah that the kingdom of God is ‘good news to the poor.’ Many see this as a proclamation of permanent Jubilee under the new covenant, when the differences between rich and poor are eliminated.²¹ Mary’s song in response to the annunciation similarly sets the stage for a Messiah who will bring about radical social justice (Lk 1:46-55). Only a reversal of the status quo is sufficiently radical to bring about this kind of justice: the poor, not the rich, will be invited to the banquet (Lk 14:15-24); the disciples are urged to give all they have to the poor; and salvation is declared in Zacchaeus’ house when he reverses the flow of money by giving to the poor.

The epistles also portray giving to the needy as unequivocal. In the midst of profound tensions in the early church concerning Jewish and Gentile Christians, giving to the poor was beyond dispute (Gal 2:10). The purpose of work, according to Eph 4:28 is not so much to make ends meet but in order to have

¹⁹ Fee, *Listening to the Spirit*, 53.

²⁰ Wenham, David. *The Parables of Jesus*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989, 164.

²¹ Yoder, John H. *The Politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. ²1994, 71.

something to give to the poor. 1 Jn 3:17 connects giving to the poor with authenticity of discipleship, in line with what has already been discussed above.

New Testament teaching about the kingdom of God, therefore, reverses believers' attitudes to possessions and wealth in a consumer culture by juxtaposing the issue of possessions with the need for justice and the pursuit of the kingdom of God. The true value of possessions and property is unlocked when they are used to bring about justice for the poor and to extend the kingdom, not when they are acquired and accumulated, as consumerism would have us believe.

CONSUMERISM AND TRANSIENCE: A RESURRECTION PARADIGM

In addition to the insatiability of human greed, consumer culture depends on the transience of material things for its perpetuation. The more disposable the goods, the more frenzied the pace and the greater the volume of consumer activity. Furthermore, a consumer society urges its members to surround themselves with commodities and images that will distract them from the unsavoury reality of the transience of life itself.

The concept of transience also punctuates New Testament teaching about possessions and property. 'Worldly wealth' is contrasted with 'true riches' (Lk 16:11), 'treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal' with 'treasures in heaven' (Mt 6:19-20). Paul urges Timothy to 'command [those who are rich] to do good and to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life' (1 Tim 6:18-19). The author of Hebrews recounts how 'you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.' The book of Revelation describes the cataclysmic fall of Babylon, with all her fabulous riches: 'In one hour she has been brought to ruin!' (Rev 18:19b).

One response to the transience of physical existence is the stirring up of a longing for permanence. Another is to conclude that the material world has no intrinsic value apart, possibly, from embodying the spiritual realm. The former leads to the acquisition and accumulation of possessions and wealth in order to create a semblance of security and stability, while the latter results in a careless and destructive attitude to the created world. Consumerism easily accommodates and perpetuates both responses, and, according to many, the church has followed suit. Wendell Berry, for example, forthrightly states:

[Modern Christianity] has, for the most part, stood silently by while a predatory economy has ravaged the world, destroyed its natural beauty

*and health, divided and plundered its human communities and households.*²²

The New Testament event that challenges and transforms these attitudes to possessions and property, thereby undermining consumer culture, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Wright argues that transience acts as ‘a god-given signpost, pointing not from the material world to a non-material world, but from the world *as it is* to the world *as it is meant one day to be*; pointing, in other words, from the present to the future which God has in store.’²³ That future is guaranteed by the resurrection: the resurrection of Jesus as the firstfruits of a new world order declares, according to Wright, that what has been done for him will be done for the entire universe.²⁴ It points to the future transformation of the created order into a permanent one that transcends our limited notions of time, physicality and spirituality. Jesus has inaugurated that process in defeating death, evil and sin on the cross and rising again as the firstborn of the coming age.

Paul concludes his seminal teaching on resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 with the exhortation to ‘always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain’ (1 Cor 15:58). Here, and in the frequent gospel references to ‘treasure in heaven’ mentioned above, a resurrection paradigm that challenges consumer culture is found: possessions are to be used in a way which manifests the Lordship of Christ here and now, in anticipation of the renewal of the whole created order at the end of time. Commodities are to be made and used in a way that reflect and respect the creativity, beauty and goodness of creation, pointing to its Creator. As has already been argued, possessions and wealth are to be used to pursue justice and to create community, but also to celebrate humanity’s God-given creativity with the lavish generosity that characterises God’s creation. A resurrection paradigm enhances and stretches our imagination because the very transience of the material world causes us to reach for the eternity and permanence that the resurrection of Christ has declared to be certain; whereas consumerism, not seeing beyond the transience of things, stultifies creativity and imagination and, thereby, the sense of the eternal.²⁵

CONSUMERISM AND POWERS: A PARADIGM OF DISARMAMENT

Many would argue that as far as the 21st century is concerned, the culture of consumerism goes far beyond matters of personal or even communal behaviour: housed in the economics of global capitalism and the ideology of the market

²² Wendell Berry in Walsh, Brian J. and Keesmaat, Sylvia C. *Colossians Re:mixed: Subverting the Empire*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005, 168.

²³ Wright, Tom. *Surprised by Hope*. London: SPCK, 2007, 106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁵ Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians*, 141, quoting Brueggemann, Walter. *Interpretation and Obedience*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991, 185.

place, it has become an empire in which a 'pseudo-deity'²⁶ is worshipped by means of idolatrous greed. In such a context, it can be argued that the biblical language of the 'rulers of this age' (1 Cor 2:6,8), 'powers' (Rom 8:38, Eph 6:12, Col 1:16; 2:15, Heb 6:5, 1 Pet 3:22), 'authorities' (Eph 3:10; 6:12, Col 1:16; 2:15, 1 Pet 3:22) and of the 'basic principles of this world' (Gal 4:3, Col 2:8,20) are appropriate as points of correspondence for a discussion about consumer culture today.

Wink, for example, maintains that 'when an entire network of Powers becomes integrated around idolatrous values, we get what can be called *the Domination System*'.²⁷ Consumer culture wedded to the socioeconomic and political structures of global capitalism and democracy could be seen as such a domination system. Wink, Yoder, Walsh and Keesmaat all agree that while such structures were created by Christ and therefore inherently good (Col 1:16), idolatry has caused them to become inhabited by evil powers so that they are in need of redemption, or, in the language of Colossians, of disarmament (2:15). Wright concurs:

*Turning away from the living God is turning towards that which has no life in itself. Worship that which is transient, and it can only give you death. But when you do commit that idolatry, evil is unleashed into the world, setting off chain reactions with incalculable consequences.*²⁸

Such 'rulers of this age' were responsible for crucifying 'the Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2:8), for 'evil is defeated when it is allowed to expend itself in demonic fury on that which it hates the most, the Source of all good.'²⁹ In the context of consumerism it is not surprising, therefore, that the events that led to the cross were set in motion by Judas' greed in negotiating a payment of 30 pieces of silver in order to betray Jesus (Mt 26:14-16). Judas and the authorities treated Jesus as a consumer commodity, not realising that in so doing, the power of consumerism itself was to be decisively defeated and disarmed.

The challenge, therefore, is to identify, unmask and engage with how consumerism feeds the idolatry and evil within socioeconomic structures so that they can be redeemed and once again aligned with their God-given purposes.³⁰ Individuals who allow themselves to be 'held captive' or absorbed by the idolatrous power of transnational companies or of unbridled capitalist ideology become vehicles of their evil power. As Kavanaugh points out, those who recognize the idolatrous nature of that power must inevitably live in tension:

²⁶ Blomberg, Craig L. *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*. Leicester/Downers' Grove, IL: Apollos/IVP, 1999, 132 quoting Betz.

²⁷ Wink, Walter. *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998, 27.

²⁸ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 106.

²⁹ Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians*, 111.

³⁰ Wink, *Powers*, 29 and Yoder, *Politics*, 153 ff.

In a culture of lived atheism and enthroned commodity – whether in its traditional forms or in its pseudo-liberated surrogates – the practicing Christian should look like a Martian. He or she will never feel fully at home in the commodity kingdom. If the Christian does feel at home, something is drastically wrong.³¹

Ultimately everyone is entangled in a network of powers which is inhabited to greater or lesser degrees by evil forces. Following Christ's example, Christians and churches are to 'unmask and disarm' these powers in the same way that Christ did: through weakness and the cross, but in the certainty of the resurrection victory over all competing powers that will be complete when the kingdoms of heaven and earth become one under the Lordship of Christ.

CONCLUSION

Idoltrous greed is the hermeneutic key that connects New Testament texts about property, possessions and wealth with consumer culture today. Greed keeps the consumer engine running and is unambiguously condemned as a rival god in scripture.

Liberation from attachment to, anxiety about and dependence on possessions and wealth is the hallmark of authentic, Spirit-empowered discipleship: it is characteristic of those who obey the call to discipleship as well as of those who embark on the life and task of following Christ. Consumerism, by contrast, is a slave master that imprisons its adherents and thwarts would-be disciples' commitment to Christ.

Whereas consumerism lauds self-sufficiency and individualism, New Testament teaching exhorts Christians to practice dependence on one another and on God, mirroring God's sacrifice of himself on the cross for the sake of others. This dependence takes the form of generous and joyful sharing of possessions and property in a way that elevates the value of Spirit-filled unity through relationship with others and to God above material things.

New Testament teaching about the kingdom of God is characterised by a reversal of values. Acquiring and amassing possessions or property are of no value unless they are used and shared for the sake of pursuing justice and extending the kingdom of God. The idolatrous sway of greed means that there can be no compromise between the pursuit of God's kingdom and submission to consumerism.

Consumer culture attempts to cover up the truth about the transience of the material world, whereas New Testament teaching about the resurrection of Jesus engages with the issue head-on: the transience of material goods points to the permanence of the recreated order of which the resurrection of Christ is the firstfruits. Possessions and property, therefore, are to be used to celebrate God-

³¹ Kavanaugh, *Following Christ*, 143.

given creativity in a way that imaginatively anticipates the renewal of all things at the end of time.

Finally, consumerism penetrates the social, political and economic structures of the world, causing them to become infiltrated by evil through the idolatry of ‘selfish capitalism’³² and other fundamentally materialist ideologies. Such ‘powers’ unleashed by consumerism must be challenged and disarmed so that socioeconomic systems can serve God’s purposes once again, bringing them under the Lordship of Christ in the power of his resurrection.

New Testament teaching about possessions and property refuses to be packaged in rules or regulations. Only by inhabiting the rich tapestry of New Testament narrative and teaching can a sufficiently nuanced response to today’s consumer culture be found that embraces freedom with discipline, radical generosity with sacrifice, and creative celebration with victorious combat. Were the church to heed the combined prophetic force of these New Testament challenges to consumerism, the result would be the reform of the church – and perhaps its revival.

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³² From the title of a book by James, O. *The Selfish Capitalism: Origins of Affluenza*. London: Vermilion, 2008.