Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church, by Paul Louis Metzger, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007, pages: x + 191, pb. £10, ISBN 978-0-8028-3068-5.

Reviewed by Henry Kuo

The social ethicist Gary Dorrien retells an interesting story of when Graham launched his evangelistic "Crusades" across the nation.[1] Graham's popular message, one that continues to be used today, emphasized that a relationship with Jesus was the solution to all social evil. One prominent critic of Graham's evangelistic strategy, Reinhold Niebuhr, then a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, argued that Graham's "Crusades" not only lacked theological substance, but was not even realistic! After all, how could one claim that when many white slavemasters were Christian (or, "had a relationship with Jesus Christ") before the Civil War? Interestingly, many of Niebuhr's friends disagreed, one of them being Union's president Henry Pit Van Dusen, who argued that while Graham's evangelistic strategy presented an all-too-simple version of Christianity, at least it introduced people to Jesus. From there, people could be open to more complex theological matters. Unfortunately, Niebuhr's criticism was prescient – the majority became disinterested in such complex theological matters, seeing it as detracting from the central message of the Gospel.

The same story seems to repeat itself today. Like Niebuhr few have noticed it, which makes Paul Louis Metzger's *Consuming Jesus* important reading for today's Christians. Metzger's thesis is simple yet stunning: the evangelical church today is increasingly shaped by free market capitalism, which blinds it to the race and class barriers in the name of church growth. In a sense, his argument is not new; liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and James Cone have been highly critical of how Western Christianity, particularly in the United States, has failed to address racial and economic injustices on the basis of capitalism. Metzger, however, distinguishes his theology from theirs in that his cultural theology begins with the gospel and takes the theology of the sacraments very seriously. From there, he branches out to critique the existing structures of the world, most notably the free market

1 Gary Dorrien, *Economic, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice.* New York: NY: Columbia University Press, 2010, 68.

economic structure. The approach of the liberation theologians is precisely the opposite, beginning with a critique of society and rethinking the gospel to address those critiques. Metzger's approach, thus, allows for an evangelical assessment of social injustice, paving a way possibly for evangelicals and non-evangelicals to join forces in combating those injustices.

The book can roughly be divided into two parts. In the first, Metzger assesses the current state of the church, beginning with the history behind how such a "consumerist church" model evolved. He begins his analysis with the ministry of D. L. Moody, who emphasized the primacy of evangelism over and above theological rigor and dialogue. Of course, such a simplification rightly led, at best, to an indifference when it comes to theological knowledge, which "primed the pump," so to speak, for the evangelical consumer-driven church to find power politics particularly attractive. Yet, he is missing an important foundational element: the humanistic positivism that was characteristic of the 18th century Enlightenment, the idea that humanity is able on its own strength to effect great social change – no God necessary. It is this reliance of human strength that makes positivism so attractive. Indeed, I would argue that it serves as the philosophical fuel that powers free market economics, for it is only through an optimistic belief in the human ability to make things better for himself that individual decision-making, the basic building-block of economics, can be argued to result in positive outcomes. This positivism can be found in D. L. Moody's emphasis on evangelism; indeed, such muscular Christianity can only be successful within a positivist philosophical framework. Metzger continues his analysis by noting how Moody's positivism, combined with the powers of the free market, naturally gave way to redefining what "success" means in the church, namely that church growth has become the primary standard to evaluate ministry success. In doing so, the church has forgotten the poor, the discriminated, and "the least of these."

Metzger then suggests practical ways to move beyond such a consumer-driven church model, but all of them center around his plea for the church to find her Christ-rooted identity, an identity which is best symbolized at the Eucharistic table, where all are welcome, rich or poor, black or white. The Table, where by its very image people of all backgrounds can gather and enjoy fellowship with Christ, must constitute a similar community of faith

where economic injustices and racism are confronted and opposed, not papered-over. A consumerist church, on the other hand, has no wherewithal to oppose such social ills because it simply follows economic laws and gives in to whatever its parishioners demand, be it morally justifiable or not. Metzger's critique of capitalism is quite accurate, although many free market economists would no doubt argue that the free market is amoral in that it changes in accordance to the tastes and preferences of market participants. If consumers, in other words, take morality very seriously the market would take that into account. But Metzger pushes back, arguing quite correctly that capitalism itself is a *system* that shapes its participants just as much as it is shaped by them.

Unfortunately, the consumerist church model is becoming popular today, and even pastors routinely lead their churches towards such an orientation without even knowing it. For that reason, Metzger's book should constitute required or highly recommended reading for introductory theology courses or courses on theology and culture, or even courses in practical theology or ministry. I would even go so far as to assert that this book should be strongly considered for inclusion in various Sunday school or church-based Christian education classes, particularly classes for youths since today's youths are most susceptible to market forces and the consumerism that it inculcates. Indeed, it is high time that the church begin to resemble the church of Acts 2:42-47 instead of any generic corporate institution.