Where Consumerism and Christianity Clash

Consider the hours we spend on food and drink: going to the grocery store, perusing cookbooks and magazines for recipes, being sure the kids have lunch money, grabbing a bottle of water on the way to work, and stopping midmorning for a coffee break. We eat and drink in order to live. “Daily bread” is one of the things for which Jesus taught us to pray and about which he urged us not to worry.

He made a meal central to the church’s life: bread and wine, which speak of his body and blood, sustain us with mercy and slake our thirst for joy.

In one way, then, we are inescapably consumers. We have to consume to live. But what if we’re living to consume?

That’s consumerism – the idea that we can find fulfillment and happiness by buying, owning, accumulating, eating, drinking and experiencing more things.

Consumerism is driven by emptiness, an inner and aching void that we’re anxious to fill.

I think the emptiness has a purpose: to send us on a quest for beauty, truth, goodness and, ultimately, for the Holy, but we misspend the emptiness on more immediate and less enduring things.

This emptiness is behind our clamoring demand for more stuff, status and security.

Emptiness drives consumerism, and it depends on our having an array of options and the power to choose among them.

Have you bought blue jeans lately? Classic fit, relaxed fit, painter’s pant, low rise, straight-leg, boot cut, authentic tint, faded, pre-washed, stone-washed, acid stone washed and – so it seems to me – pre-worn and pre-worn out.

Consumerism depends on options because we are always in search of something new and improved, novel and untried.
Emptiness, options and the power to choose are the essential elements of consumerism galvanized by savvy marketing and pitch-perfect advertising.

There’s a fascinating story about how religion, advertising and marketing have long been intertwined in this country.

When revivalism swept across America in the 19th century, it helped to create the climate and structural models that modern advertising uses to this day.

On the fringes of camp meetings, to which people came not just for religion but also for socializing and entertainment, medicine peddlers hawked their wares, promising relief from physical and emotional ailments.

Like the preachers in the meetings, they promised miracles and used “before and after” testimonials from satisfied customers who found amazing cures in their products.

Inside the meetings, people were saying, “Before I met Christ, I was a drunk or a gambler or a crook, but now I’m on the straight and narrow.”

Outside the meetings, people were saying, “Before I tried Grove’s Elixir or Carter’s Pills, I had bad digestion or constant pain, but now I am free.”

If people could choose conversion, they could choose other remedies.

An advertising pattern was set that persisted through the 19th century and prevails today:

- Identify (or create) and dramatize a need
- Promise that your product will meet it
- Move your customer to buy it

Advertising is consumer evangelism, and consumerism is our national religion. So we shouldn’t be surprised that consumerism has affected how we view faith and church.

Increasingly, we see the church as one more place we go to get our needs met and to be entertained.
Faith – “spirituality” – is one more choice we make, like a breakfast cereal or a movie or an automobile.

Church is one more option about which we decide, like whether to spend an evening with friends or go to the gym or attend a PTA meeting.

Most often, we decide to do whatever we think will make us feel good about ourselves – and to deliver that good feeling quickly.

If church gets too demanding, challenges our commitments or questions our priorities, then we have other ways to spend our time.

Those who lead faith communities in this climate of consumerism know how easy it is for people to walk away, like dissatisfied customers who vow never to darken the door of a restaurant where they had one bad experience with a huffy waitress.

That’s why there are scores of books and countless seminars on, essentially, how churches can increase customer satisfaction.

By the way, there’s a lot for church leaders to learn about communicating clearly and providing good hospitality and attentive service, which can be an expression of servanthood and not simply of commercialism.

It doesn’t make sense to me, on any level, for people to feel more respected and better treated at Nordstrom or Disneyworld than they are at church.

Not all of the influence of consumerism on the church is so benign, though. In fact, consumerism may well be our greatest challenge because its values clash with central commitments of the Christian faith.

Consumerism says, “Have it your way.” Jesus says; “Pray then like this: your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Consumerism says: “Happiness can be bought and sold.” Christianity says: “Fulfillment is a gift of grace.”

Consumerism says: “Everything and everyone has a price.” Christianity says: “The things that matter most are priceless: faith, hope and love.”

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