

Live simply ...

so others may simply live



A Think-piece by Chris Frazer
July 2010



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1. Unwrapping Consumerism

HISTORICAL BEGINNINGS

What is consumerism? One dictionary definition is: ‘the theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable; *also*: a preoccupation with and an inclination toward the buying of consumer goods.’¹

Steadily over the past 400 to 600 years, a culture and society has developed that has centred its focus and efforts on trade and consumption. The vast accumulation of wealth from colonised countries contributed to the industrial revolution in England and parts of Europe. The rapidly-changing landscape of how production and wealth were understood affected society as a whole.² And whilst, initially, abundant consumption was the exclusive domain of the wealthy elite, the crisis of overproduction in the 19th century gave rise to the making of mass consumption.

Richard Robins describes it this way:

The consumer revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was caused in large part by a crisis in production; new technologies had resulted in production of more goods, but there were not enough people to buy them. Since production is an essential part of the culture of capitalism, society quickly adapted to the crisis by convincing people to buy things, by altering basic institutions and even generating an ideology of pleasure. The economic crisis of the late 19th century was solved, but at considerable expense to the environment in the additional waste that was created and resources consumed.³

But for mass consumption to succeed, goods needed to be more accessible to the masses; hence, the need for sourcing cheap labour and raw materials to keep production costs to a minimum and still guarantee sizeable profit margins.

‘... a culture and society has developed that has centred its focus and efforts on trade and consumption’

It is argued that consumerism is the most successful culture the world has ever known; its success trumpeted through significant technological advances and increasing wealth and power.

¹ www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consumerism

² www.globalissues.org/print/article/236

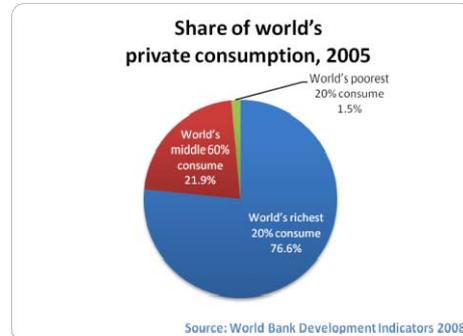
³ Robbins, Richard, *Global Problems and the culture of Capitalism*, 1999, as cited in Global Issues



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Yet such success also mirrors negative consequences, as the purported fruits of consumerism have not been evenly shared. Indeed, creating affluence for 20% of the world's people—who consume 76.6% of the world's resources—has plunged millions of men, women and children living in developing countries into absolute financial poverty and deprivation. Besides, in the relentless striving for more we are witnessing an unprecedented destruction of once productive land, pollution of vital water sources and the decimation of our wildlife and natural habitat.



Is all consumption bad? No—as from the beginning of humanity, consuming has been a means of survival. We consume food and water for essential nourishment, and as humans developed, primitive tools were fashioned to provide shelter, food and clothing. As life advanced, so did technology, which made living easier and more comfortable. The production and trading of goods and services is beneficial for the economy of countries and for the people who live there.

However, there is a growing concern regarding the present day culture of an excessive consumption that is not sustainable, the uneven nature of the trading playing field, and the level of obscene wealth and power held by the few to the detriment of the majority of the world's inhabitants. Originating mainly from Europe, trade has increasingly become seen as the ultimate source of wellbeing and happiness. *'I shop, therefore I am.'*

Moreover, research suggests that increasing wealth, beyond that of lifting people out of extreme financial deprivation, has no automatic correlation with increased happiness. Indeed, a new kind of poverty, a poverty of time, is ever increasing as more and more wealth is needed to purchase the constant bombardment of goods and services deemed essential for living. A term has been coined to describe this new phenomenon—*affluenza*.

AFFLUENZA

One dictionary defines 'affluenza' as: 'An extreme form of materialism in which consumers overwork and accumulate high levels of debt to purchase more goods (affluence + influenza)'.⁴

'Our society is more troubled by problems of overabundance. We are three times richer than



⁴ www.wordspy.com/words/affluenza.asp



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in the 1950s, and diseases particular to “**affluenza**” clog our social and individual arteries. We are more overworked, more stressed, more depressed and much fatter. ...

‘Critiques of **affluenza** go deeper than puritanical dismay at the aggressive vulgarity of materialism. The centerpiece of the argument is that we are obsessed privately with more income and better goods, and collectively with ‘growth’ and “progress”. Yet all the scholarly work on well-being shows, that after passing a benchmark of real deprivation, greater prosperity does not lead to increased happiness.’⁵

BORN TO BUY

A television commercial portrays a young couple sitting on a sofa and looking miserable. The scene then switches to another couple with their young child, vibrant and happy beside their newly-purchased SUV. *Why the difference in the two families?* The second family was out enjoying the advertised delights of owning the latest four-wheel drive. The message is clear: *wellbeing and happiness is dependent upon owning the right consumer goods!*



Such constant consumerist communication is supported by an obtaining-with-ease credit system that extols the benefits of immediate gratification and delayed payment: *buy now and pay nothing for 36 months!* New Zealanders have taken on board this message and enthusiastically embraced the use of credit. Current figures show New Zealand card holders currently owe NZ\$5.3 billion or 3% of GDP.⁶

The immediacy of having without paying is extremely seductive. Couple this with media messages that extort ‘*you are worth it*’ and it is not hard to see how such carefully-crafted communication seduces the viewer into buying into a concept which purchasing of a particular product promotes. Eckhart Tolle⁷ argues that in many cases we purchase ‘**identity enhancers**’. Such image promoters include designer clothing, a particular brand of cosmetics, and objects that endorse certain lifestyle images.

‘The message is clear: wellbeing and happiness is dependent upon owning the right consumer goods!’

⁵ Anne Manne, ‘Sell Your Soul and Spend, Spend, Spend,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 14, 2003.

⁶ Reserve Bank statistics.

⁷ www.consumercide.com



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MADE TO BREAK

Ponder this scenario: you are heading off to purchase what you consider to be a much-needed item; a replacement for the older, worn-out one at home. Now, pause and reflect: is the item at home *actually* worn out? **Or is it simply worn out in your mind?**

Paradoxically, it is as much the apparent notions of *perceived obsolescence* that has us heading for the newest version, than the actuality of the older version still being in good working order, however old and supposedly outdated. Whether the item is clothing, homeware or the latest technology, fashion and design is constantly changing as our westernised culture urges us to **keep up** and **buy** the very latest, whether that is the newest cell phone on the market, the most fashionable pair of shoes or a newer-model car. Yet, ironically, the satisfaction that comes from owning the *very latest* is short lived and the need for *more* is what keeps consumerism ever increasing at a rate that is no longer sustainable.

'If the levels of consumption that ... the most affluent people enjoy today were replicated across even half of the roughly 9 billion people projected to be on the planet in 2050, the impact on our water supply, air quality, forests, climate, biological diversity, and human health would be severe.'⁸

Closely aligned with perceived obsolescence is *planned obsolescence*. We have heard the case for buying new many times: *'it's cheaper to replace than to get it repaired'*. And in many instances, this is true. *Just-in-time* manufacturing processes, coupled with the increasing exodus of industry off shore to where labour costs are dramatically cheaper, has contributed to the mass availability of goods at bargain-basement prices.

... our westernised culture urges us to keep up and buy the very latest ...'

Furthermore, such goods are often made to have a limited life, as well as being restricted from repair due to the unavailability of replacement parts. Alongside ever-changing designs in manufacturing, this quickly leads to products being seen as outdated.

It is important to remember that in terms of cost to the environment and the resources required to increasingly produce more, both planned and perceived obsolescence cost far more in the long term. I would also argue that the unceasing quest to consume is very expensive as further work hours are needed in order to purchase the mounting list of *must haves* for today's 21st-century living. Time poverty is fast becoming a reality in many homes.

⁸ www.worldwatch.org/node/810



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LIVE SIMPLY ... SO OTHERS MAY SIMPLY LIVE

A tourist focuses in on a most idyllic picture: a man in simple clothes dozes in a fishing boat that has been pulled out of the waves that roll up the sandy beach. The camera clicks; the fisherman awakes. The tourist sits down beside him and launches into a conversation. 'The weather is great, there are plenty of fish; why are you lying around instead of going out and catching more?' To which the fisherman replies, 'Because I caught enough for my family's needs this morning.'

'But just imagine', the tourist says, 'you would go out there three or four times a day, bringing home three or four times as much fish! You know what could happen?' The fisherman shakes his head. 'After about a year you could buy yourself a motor boat,' says the tourist. 'After two years you could buy a second one, and after three years you could have a cutter or two. And just think! One day you might be able to build a freezing plant or a smoke house; you might eventually even get your own helicopter for tracing shoals of fish and guiding your fleet of cutters, or you could acquire your own trucks to ship your fish to the capital, and then ...' 'And then? ...' asks the fisherman.

'And then,' the tourist continues triumphantly, 'you could be calmly sitting at the beachside, dozing in the sun and looking at the beautiful ocean!' The fisherman looks at the tourist: 'But that is exactly what I was doing before you came along!'

In this little anecdote, the writer, Heinrich Bolle, successfully captures a general truth, that the endless pursuit of either success or money without a purpose does not offer lasting happiness; but rather, quality of life is measured by how our time is spent. Furthermore, the narrative draws attention to a judgement value that is all pervasive in westernised societies, one that fails to recognise the validity of simplicity of living as depicted by the fisherman, against the presumed success of growth and prosperity held out by the tourist's vision.

'... significant concerns are being raised over increasing mass consumption and its negative impacts on the whole of society and the planet that sustains us'

There is a diversity of opinion surrounding the effects of consumerism. On the one hand, US political leaders, following the events of 9/11, urged citizens to 'go out and shop'; whereby, at the other end of the spectrum, significant concerns are being raised over increasing mass consumption and its negative impacts on the whole of society and the planet that sustains us.

Amidst this maelstrom of opinion, where do we as followers of Christ sit? Have we—in part, or wholeheartedly—embraced the ever-relentless conveyor belt of **more, I need more?** Do we need to re-think our understanding of quality of life indicators that are life enhancing and inclusive of all people and our planet?



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Theologian Richard Gaillardetz argues that our greater-than-ever use of commodities for our convenience and ease has led to an increasing disconnect with our world around us and a lessening relationship with, and appreciation of, our communities, neighbours and friends. Yet, it is *'where two or three are gathered in my name'* that the presence of God is found—in the every day and ordinary experiences of life. If we reduce our days to merely consumable experiences and prioritise commodities, then we risk being distracted from our true selves, our friends/family, earth and God.

This passage from Matthew serves as a timely reminder that life is a precious gift not to be lived in the endless pursuit of material goods for individualist gain:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?⁹

'... life is a precious gift not to be lived in the endless pursuit of material goods for individualist gain'

Life's blessings are to be found within the world our God created, which at this present time is under threat through overuse and abuse. 'Such a threat,' claims David White,¹⁰ 'requires that churches become learning communities, learning to think critically about the threats to Christian faith and creatively about their call to respond.'

'If the Church is to faithfully embody the beauty of God, we must learn to engage complex issues as the environment, the global economy, poverty and consumerism.'

⁹ Gospel of St. Matthew, Chapter 6; V. 25-27

¹⁰ White, David, *'Consumerism, Character and the Witness of the Church'*.



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Study Guide

The Dog and his Bone

A hound dog found a bone and held it tightly in his mouth. He growled and scowled at anyone who tried to take it away. Off into the woods he went to bury his prize. When he came to a stream, he trotted over the footbridge and happened to glance into the water, catching sight of his own reflection. Thinking it was another dog with a bigger bone, he growled and scowled. The reflection growled and scowled back. 'I'll get *that* bone too,' thought the greedy dog, snapping his sharp teeth at the image in the water. Alas, his own bone fell with a splash, out of sight, the moment he opened his mouth to bite!

21st century consumerism offers a never-ending illusion of what might be, if we only buy the latest, most technologically-advanced model, or the product that's bigger and better than what we presently own. Yet the relentless drive for *more* has seen credit card debt escalate and people work longer hours to afford the increasing list of 'must haves'. Paradoxically, at the same time as we are encouraged to spend, we are told to save our money so that we may continue to enjoy a good lifestyle in our retirement years. The amount identified as being so necessary for such a lifestyle continues to be re-assessed upwards, which is creating fear for many older people who face the prospect of not having enough.

Yet, in Matthew 6:25-27, we read:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. It is argued that our present high level of consumption (in westernised countries) is not sustainable, and that such wealth is not evenly shared, disadvantaging the majority of our global neighbours. *What is your response?*
2. Consumerism has been identified as the dominant culture in wealthy countries. Citizens are increasingly being identified as being, first and foremost, consumers. *How is consumerist thinking reshaping how we live our lives? What role have media messages played in this?*
3. The relentless drive for *more* is all-encompassing as newer and updated goods rapidly replace seemingly 'out-of-date' stock. *Can you identify a time when you have unnecessarily replaced goods that became 'worn out' in your mind?*
4. Consider the Matthew passage. *How does its teachings differ from the way we often think and act in our own lives?*



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2. Unwrapping the Hidden Ingredients

POT-LUCK PURCHASING

You've read the label and checked it's made in New Zealand, so all is well. *But is it really?*

Globalisation and its resultant international trading has brought a wealth of exotic food, ingredients, clothing and all manner of affordable goods right to our local doors. Yet such internationalism of our purchases has led to an increasing disconnect between the consumer and the raw materials, manufacturing and supply chain processes.



What is our understanding of place of origin labelling?

The NZ Chamber of Commerce states:

A place of origin is defined as the country or region where the product was created in its final form from its raw materials or constituent parts. In other words, it is the country or region where the product's '**essential quality**' was created. It is not necessarily the place where the most money was spent on a product—and it is not the place where only final assembly or packaging was done.

New Zealand has legislation in place¹¹ to make sure fair trading practices are adhered to and safety standards for goods are maintained, as well as the Food Safety Authority to ensure all food stuffs meet defined standards for consumption; thereby lessening any chance of harm and offering assurance to consumers with regards to quality.¹² Furthermore, goods imported into the country are subjected to rigorous border controls.¹³

However, at present New Zealand does not have mandatory country of origin labelling on consumer goods and in consequence there is no way of knowing the possible extent of labour or environment exploitation contained within the goods offered for sale.

'... there is no way of knowing the possible extent of labour or environment exploitation contained within the goods offered for sale'

Despite the fact that consumer awareness is growing, helping the buyer become aware of what lies behind the label of a limited range of goods such as tea, coffee

¹¹ www.consumeraffairs.govt.nz

¹² www.nzfsa.govt.nz

¹³ www.customs.govt.nz/importers



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and cotton (thanks to initiatives taken by the Fair Trade Association and other like-minded non-governmental organisations), other widely-used goods are sold unnoticed because they're well below the ethical radar. Conversely, even when such injustice is noticed, our lives have become so inextricably linked with 21st century consumerism—which we are not prepared to do without—that there is a compliant acceptance—and thereby an almost subtle approval—surrounding the stark realities of the mining and marketing of mineral and resources deemed so essential to western living.

THE THREE Ts OF TERROR

The trade in tin, tungsten and tantalum is significantly contributing to the terror of violence and conflict in the Congo. There is a thriving industry arising from the sale of these minerals, the profits of which are fuelling the war in the Congo.¹⁴ *Why is the industry continuing to grow?* Such a growth is due to our (the western world's) insatiable appetite for the latest technology and electronic equipment.



Tungsten is what makes our cell phones vibrate, tantalum stores the electricity in the capacitors, and tin is used in the soldering of circuit boards. The fourth important mineral within our phones is gold, the highest value metal out of the four.

What is the process from mine to our hands? In the Congo, minerals are often brutally extracted using forced labour, including young children, then smuggled out of Africa and shipped to Asia, where they become mixed with minerals coming in from other countries.

Once refined they are shipped to many parts of the world where they are processed into components for use in many of our cell phones, such as iPhones and Blackberries, and into many computers/laptops, game consoles, iPods and MP3 players.

Having no international mechanisms in place to regulate the trading in 'conflict minerals'¹⁵ has enabled a number of armed factions unfettered access to global markets in order to obtain funds for conflict¹⁶.

¹⁴ www.enoughproject.org

¹⁵ Conflict Mineral refers to minerals mined in conditions of armed conflict and human rights abuses, notably in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, by the Congolese National Army and various armed rebel groups, including the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda. The profits from the sale of these minerals finance continued fighting in the Second Congo War, and control of lucrative mines becomes a focus of the fighting as well. The most commonly mined minerals are cassiterite, wolframite, coltan (tantalum), and gold, which are extracted from the Eastern Congo, and passed through a variety of intermediaries before being purchased by multinational electronics companies. These minerals are essential in the manufacture of a variety of devices, like cell phones, laptops, and MP3 players. www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict_minerals



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‘... increasing concerns over how minerals are used to fuel conflict has led to a growing international call for transparency in supply chains’

There is a lethal link between the cell phones we enjoy using every day, the vast mineral wealth of the Congo, the ongoing war that has claimed ‘to date’ over five million lives, and the overwhelming magnitude of rapes and murders of women and children. Increasing concerns over how minerals are used to fuel conflict has led to a growing international call for transparency in supply chains.

In the US, the Congo Conflict Minerals Act 2009 is in front of the Senate. The principle of the bill is to help bring to an end the trading of conflict minerals. Andrew Hedland reported:

The State Department will be asked to track the funding of the armed groups participating in this conflict. U.S.-registered companies that manufacture products that utilise conflict minerals will need to file reports with the Securities and Exchange Commission revealing the country these minerals were attained from.¹⁷

Co-chair of the Enough Project claims that ‘there are few other conflicts in the world where the link between our consumer appetites and mass human suffering is so direct’.

MADE WHERE?

The manufacturer’s logo is easily recognisable as a reputable brand, the country of origin is clearly stated ... *but what’s missing?* Any indication that the product/item you are about to purchase has been made in a sweat shop or produced by hands not free to choose! Furthermore, the environmental harm that may have resulted through the production process is not transparent.

Consider the harsh realities of the production chain arising from plantation, farm or factory. The working conditions, what pay—if any—was received, the treatment of the children, women and men who toil long hours to produce the endless array of ridiculously-cheap merchandise— these are consistently hidden from consumer view, buried deep within the global supply chain. Our western malls, speciality shops and supermarkets reveal little of the true source beneath the ‘made by ...’ labels of many imported goods, ingredients and materials. In New Zealand, a Private Members Bill was introduced to Parliament in 2009, the *Customs and Excise (Prohibition of Imports Made by Slave Labour) Amendment Bill*. This was strongly supported by several parties but rejected by Parliament. Had this Bill been passed, countries using slavery-type practices in production of goods would have been required to be identified and their goods banned from entry into New Zealand.

¹⁶ www.globalpolicy.org/images/pdfs/06tin.pdf

¹⁷ www.statepress.com/archive/node/9463



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BY WHOM?

Exploitation of people, forced labour such as debt bondage, domestic servitude, the worse forms of child labour, and the more recent media focus on the phenomenon of trafficking in persons has been present throughout human history. What has changed somewhat is the widespread global nature of such abuse and exploitation that is entangled within large-scale international trading.

Article 2, of the Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, states:

(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

The use of forced labour and/or abusive working conditions is predominately an issue of gender. The non-governmental organisation Feminist Majority Organisation claims:

Women make up 90 per cent of sweatshop labourers. The majority of these women are between the ages of 15 and 22. Companies that use sweatshop labour to increase their own profit margins are taking advantage of predominantly young women.

Factories that employ the use of sweatshop labour perpetuate numerous injustices. Women are paid as little as six cents an hour and work ten to twelve hour shifts. In many instances overtime is mandatory. In some cases, women are allowed only two drinks of water and one bathroom break per shift. Sexual harassment, corporal punishment, and verbal abuse are all means used by supervisors to instil fear and keep employees in line.¹⁸

Time and cost pressures on a workplace lead to poor pay and working conditions, trade union suppression, and insecure employment. But these impacts on workers are not distributed equally: they fall disproportionately on women. Women are more likely to be in jobs where labour rights abuses are common, including precarious forms of work. Women are more susceptible to labour rights abuses when they occur. Productive, reproductive and domestic responsibilities constrain women's ability to seek other work, to take action to improve their working

¹⁸ www.feminist.org/other/sweatshops/index.html



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conditions, or to speak out about the abuse they face. Cultural and economic constraints create obstacles to women workers speaking out about their conditions and joining a trade union.¹⁹

Of immense concern is the use of child labour in dangerous, exploitative conditions such as mining for minerals, plantation farming for cocoa and the making of carpets. For children in their formative years, this work is extremely hazardous to their development and brings subsequent ongoing health concerns. Furthermore, children made to work long hours are denied their basic right to an education, thereby perpetuating the cycle of extreme poverty and deprivation as they move into adult years.

MORE PRECIOUS THAN PURCHASES

'I owe, I owe, so off to work I go.' These words, a parody on the delightful Disney song of the seven dwarfs ('Hi ho, hi ho; it's off to work I go'), could easily symbolise the 21st century consumerism culture that is so pervasive throughout all aspects of today's living.

*How much of our daily lives are we preoccupied by what we amass, consume or throwaway? A constant barrage of media messages demand last season's fashions be consigned to wardrobe depths, herald the latest *what's in* and *what's out*, and reduces living—materially and spiritually—down to a commodity to be consumed.*

'... the overwhelming desire for more and more material goods drive many families into the stress of mounting debts ...'

William Cavanaugh argues that **'consumerism is not so much about having more as it is about having something else.** It is not buying, but shopping that captures the spirit of consumerism. Buying is certainly an important part of consumerism, but buying only brings a temporary halt to the restlessness that typifies it. It is this restlessness—the moving on to shopping for something else no matter what one has purchased—that sets the spiritual tone for consumerism.'²⁰

It is an irony that amid our technological advances, including the latest electronic equipment designed to connect us to the world and make modern living so much easier, there is an increasing disconnect between communities, neighbourhoods and in face-to-face connection. Cell phones are allowed to interrupt personal conversations, social networking sites are in danger of taking over real life interactions, and the overwhelming desire for more and more material goods drive many families into the stress of mounting debts and longer working hours in an effort to cover mounting costs.

¹⁹ www.cleanclothes.org/resources/ccf/working-conditions/cashing-in

²⁰ Cavanaugh, William, 'when enough is enough', *when God's abundant life won't fit in a shopping cart, and other mysteries of consumerism*, Sojourners' Magazine, May 2005



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Have we, in the impatient longing for ‘something else’, lost the ability to stay still and be fully present in the wonder of the here and now?

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.²¹*

Blake’s poem prescribes a vision of simplicity of living that is imaged throughout biblical teaching. Authentic Christianity holds out the promise, to all who wish to grasp the message, of a way of living and being that is far more precious than purchases. Paul’s continued call to the Philippians was a description to live life more simply. His blueprint spelt out the benchmark for such simplicity—it was to practice the teaching of Jesus to love God and love your neighbour—and to seek contentment in simple living: ‘Godliness with contentment is great gain.’

‘I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.’²²

To turn against the prevailing wind of consumerism is a daunting task that requires a significant paradigm shift away from our consumerist driven culture towards a life that advocates for the sanctity of people and of creation as a whole. Bishop Desmond Tutu reflects: ‘a person is a person through other persons ... we need other human beings in order to be human. I am because other people are.’²³

Someone once said, ‘*we create the path by walking*’. We are, I suggest, well overdue to purposefully choose an alternative route that embraces the motto, ‘*live simply so others may simply live*’.

²¹ William Blake

²² Philippians, 4: 12-13

²³ Tutu, Desmond, ‘Believe’, Hachette, 2007



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Study Guide

The Goose that laid the Golden Egg

A man and his wife had the good fortune to possess a goose that laid a Golden Egg every day. Lucky though they were, they soon began to think they were not getting rich fast enough. Imagining the bird must be made of gold inside, they decided to kill it to secure its entire store of precious metal all at once. But when they cut it open, they found the goose was just like any other goose. Thus, they failed to secure an immediate increase of wealth. What's more, their greed led to a loss of what they had previously enjoyed. (*Aesops Fables*)

William Cavanaugh argues that '**consumerism is not so much about having more as it is about having something else** ... It is not buying but shopping that captures the spirit of consumerism. Buying is certainly an important part of consumerism, but buying only brings a temporary halt to the restlessness that typifies it. It is this restlessness—the moving on to shopping for something else no matter what one has purchased—that sets the spiritual tone for consumerism' (Sojourners Magazine, May 2005).

The relentless drive for more at ever-cheaper prices—such desires come with a price that is simply too high. It's the price of extreme financial poverty, sweat-shop labour, trafficking and environmental harm.

*Give me neither poverty nor riches,
grant me only my share of bread to eat,
for fear that surrounded by plenty, I should fall away
and say, 'Yahweh—who is Yahweh?'
or else in destitution, take to stealing
and profane the name of my God.
(Proverbs 30:8-9, Jerusalem Bible)*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. It is argued that our lives are bound up within the relentless drive of consumerism. Take a look around—at our cities/towns, our own communities, churches/corps, media, and the internet. *Can you identify some of the symbols of consumerism?*
2. Globalisation has resulted in an increasing disconnect between supply chains and the consumer. *When you go shopping, is one of your purchasing priorities whether the goods you buy are ethically made?*
3. *Do you agree with William Cavanaugh's argument that consumerism is not about having more, but about having something else?*
4. The Proverbs 30 passage describes a vision of sharing and sufficiency. *If you were to embrace that vision, how might you begin to actively live it out?*



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A Think-piece by Chris Frazer

July 2010

3. Unwrapping Positive Buying

THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY'S CONSUMPTION

What images are conjured up for you by the word 'consumption'? To most of us, I suspect, the everyday familiarity of consuming involves nothing more than the purchasing, using and discarding of finished products. As we place stuff in our shopping trollies and as we consume and use a variety of merchandise, I'm not sure that our minds are readily captured by the notion of the raw materials, ingredients or the production processes carried out along the entire life cycle of the products we buy. Neither are we likely to be focused on the end result: the waste such purchases create in our landfills.



Today, most purchases come with excessive packaging; others are deliberately designed for limited or one-off use; still others are constructed in such a way that makes repairing a broken product either impossible, or merely too expensive.

The report of the Earth Summit (June 1992) states:

The simple term 'consumption' masks a great diversity of meanings. At one level, consumption means all the resources used in an economy by all consumers, both individual and institutional, and the waste that accompanies that resource use. It means both end-products and their raw material and intermediate ingredients. This meaning of consumption includes the total amount of resources used and wastes produced in the course of extracting, processing, manufacturing, packaging, transporting, selling, using, and discarding goods of all kinds- from houses, steel girders, and shipping pallets to automobiles, mattresses, and food. Also included are the resources and wastes involved in creating and delivering services of all kinds, from college educations to health care and television repair. Another term for this meaning of consumption is 'throughput'-used by ecological economists to mean the total mass of materials and energy sources that makes its way through the economy.²⁴

What is becoming increasingly clear is the disturbing reality that wealthier countries have too large a consumerist footprint. 'William Rees, an urban planner at the University of British Columbia, estimated that it requires four to six hectares of land to maintain the consumption level of the average person from a high-consumption country. The problem is that in 1990, worldwide there were only 1.7 hectares of ecologically-productive land for each person. He concluded

²⁴ http://clinton2.nara.gov/PCSD/Publications/TF_Reports/pop-intr.html



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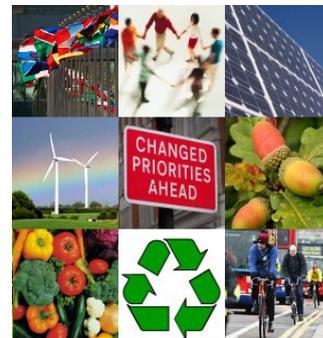
that the deficit is made up in core countries by drawing down the natural resources of their own countries and expropriating the resources, through trade, of peripheral countries.’²⁵

In other words, those in poorer countries pay dearly for our excessive appetites.
What steps might we take immediately to begin to change our consumer behaviour?

THINKING POSITIVE

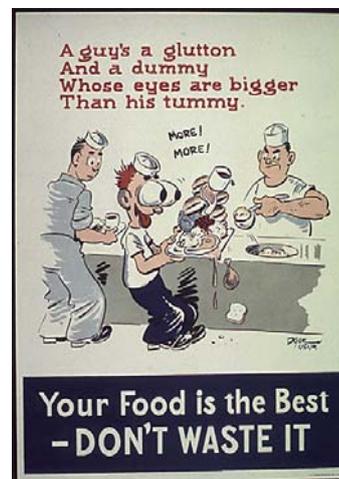
Ethical Consumer²⁶ states that ‘positive buying is choosing ethical products such as energy saving light bulbs and appliances’. In their beginners’ guide to becoming an ethical consumer an emphasis is placed on ‘making your vote count’ when shopping.

Be aware! Carrying an awareness of global poverty, human trafficking, animal welfare and green issues into our shopping basket every time we shop should help sharpen our awareness and guide our purchasing behaviour. Yes, the battery-farmed eggs and frozen chicken pieces are cheaper, but at what cost to the hen locked in a cage for its whole life?



If you can, shop local! Buying fresh produce makes sense in a number of ways: environmentally the produce has not travelled long distances; it has not been tampered with to appear cosmetically pleasing on supermarket shelves; and your purchase supports and promotes local communities. Furthermore, coming from a small store or market stall ensures the goods are not over-packaged in environmentally-damaging materials.

Buy only what you can consume! Imagine holding in your hands \$500 and then throwing it away with the rubbish. Yet an Australian study revealed that a typical Australian will bin 13 per cent of total food purchases in a year, this amount in dollar terms came to \$465 AUD. There is no reason to think we do any differently. In 2006, Statistics NZ’s survey showed we dumped 3.2 million tonnes of waste into landfills, 23 per cent of which was organic waste.²⁷ *When did you last throw away food?*



²⁵ www.globalissues.org/article/238/effects-of-consumerism

²⁶ www.ethicalconsumer.org

²⁷ www.stuff.co.nz/sunday-star-times/features/2731460/Welcome-to-the-waste-land



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REDUCE RE-USE RE-CYCLE

Merely shopping ethically is not enough, however. We also need to reduce the amount we purchase, use and discard.

'Globally, waste is rapidly becoming a key environmental issue of immense concern'

Are you about to go shopping? Then stop and think and ask these questions:

- *Do I really need this?*
- *Will I use this?*
- *Who or what may have been harmed by its production?*
- *Can I buy one second-hand or recycled?*
- *What's going to happen to it once I have finished with it?*

Globally, waste is rapidly becoming a key environmental issue of immense concern. And yet, I suspect, aside from putting out our wheelie bins on a designated morning and recycling, we give little consideration to the issue.

Have you ever paused to think, for example, that any form of food wastage or overeating is tantamount to leaving a tap running?

Waste and water (or increasing scarcity of it) are inextricably linked. For example, while all forms of production require water, by far the biggest user is agriculture. Furthermore, a report by the International Water Management Institute highlights the important role we, as consumers, have in ensuring we use the global water supply responsibly. Yet the fact remains: at present, we are wasteful with our water use. The report states:

Food consumers and businesses have a key role. Losses of food between the farmers' field to our dinner table—in food storage, transport, food processing, retail, and in our kitchens—are huge. This loss of food is equivalent to a loss in water. Reducing food loss and wastage lessens water needs in agriculture. We need to pay more attention to this fact ...; the amount of food produced on farmers' fields is much more than is necessary for a healthy, productive and active life for the global population. Clearly, distribution of food is a problem—many are hungry, while at the same time many over eat. A hidden problem is that farmers have to supply food to take care of both our **necessary consumption and our wasteful habits**. This problem can be turned into an opportunity. Targeting losses and wasteful habits may generate multiple gains, including the saving of water. In addition to saving water by a reduction of losses and wastage in the food chain, agricultural water management practices could be much more productive.²⁸

²⁸ 'Saving water from field to fork-curbing losses and wastage in the food chain, www.siwi.org/documents/Resources/Policy_Briefs/PB_From_Field_to_fork_2008.pdf



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TRUE COMMUNITY IS INTERDEPENDENT

Thomas Carlyle told a story of an Irish tenant farmer who died a hundred years ago and left a widow and three little children. This was before the days of social security. The man who owned the farm needed the house and so this poor widow was literally turned out onto the road with no resource whatsoever for herself and her family. She went to the nearest town and began to go from door to door, explaining her plight and offering to do any work to provide for her children. Person after person turned her away, saying: 'I have problems of my own. What happens to you is of no concern to me.'



After four days of no food and sleeping outside in the park, the youngest child's body was weakened and she woke with a burning fever. By noon, all three of the children were sick, and before the sun went down this little neglected family was the centre of an epidemic of diphtheria that spread to the whole town. Only at that point did it become clear that this woman's plight was the concern of the larger community. Their failure to deal with the problem at one point in time meant they had to deal with it later in a worse form.

God has given us many gifts—practical and intellectual—as well as spiritual gifts that have been freely given to us through the Holy Spirit. As members of the Body of Christ, we are called to share these gifts as we live in community with others. I have gifts I can share with you—and you have gifts you can share with me.

Each of us is interdependent upon each other.

True community is born within interdependence. Yet, by its very nature, interdependence means what I do or fail to do can affect you, and what you do or fail to do can affect me. By that same token, what we consume and how much we consume creates ripple effects that have the flow-on potential of being either life destroying or life enhancing. The power of positive or negative outcomes from our purchasing and lifestyle preferences rests with us.

The late Rev. Martin Luther King Jnr once said: '**An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.**'²⁹

Yet notions of individualism and taking care of one's own are deeply ingrained in the psyche of modern-day thought, originating from a profoundly-entrenched Protestant work ethic that extols the virtue of the 'self-made man'. And so the slogan for the industrious middleclass in England arising from the Industrial revolution was 'self-help'. In other words: 'Heaven helps those who help

²⁹ King, Coretta Scott, *The Words of Martin Luther King,* 1985



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themselves.’ This was a creed that Carlyle went on to call the ‘**gospel of Mammon**’. In his book *Past and Present* (1843), he observed:

... Our life is not a mutual helpfulness; but rather, cloaked under due laws of war, named ‘fair competition’ and so forth, it is a mutual hostility. We have profoundly forgotten ... that cash-payment is not the sole relation of human beings ...³⁰

And so, in this age of significant disparities, we see food riots where shop shelves are brimming with goods, mass starvation in a world that has more than enough to feed everyone, and environmental degradation on an unprecedented scale.

Moreover, no country is immune to such economic inequality. A recent two-week project in Wellington (based on the United States’ permanent Free Stores) encourages Kiwis to consider the harm of consumerism—primarily the wastage of surplus or spoiled food items. The shop, staffed by volunteers, gave away donated goods that companies would otherwise discard free to ‘shoppers’. No one was questioned as to need, with everyone treated as equals. Reporter Kylie Walker said: ‘Some of the stories are heart-breaking ... the pensioner, who after paying her bills, has \$13 to live on, and the middle-aged woman who burst in to tears when told we had nothing left (on that day).’³¹

‘... notions of individualism and taking care of one’s own are deeply ingrained in the psyche of modern-day thought ...’

What then, is our response as Christians? In recent years, awareness has grown regarding such issues as slave labour, child trafficking, climate change, and the need for fairer trading of goods and services. Christians have, by and large, enthusiastically embraced the cry to *buy Fair Trade goods* and supported a variety of campaigns aimed at raising awareness of issues such as national and global poverty. Live simply so that others may simply live, may be a good motto; *however, is there not a paradox here for us?*

I invite you to reflect on Roger Kerr’s challenging words—do they ring true for you and me in our own individual lives?

It is ironic that those who denounce individualism and espouse collectivism nevertheless behave in their own economic lives just like individuals who support markets. They sell their houses to the highest bidders, snap up bargains when the opportunity arises, and, I dare say, lawfully minimise their tax liabilities. Being known to oppose capitalism may be a fairly reliable indicator of the way some people vote, or whether

³⁰ Lecture 23—The Age of Ideologies www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture23a.html

³¹ The Dominion Post NZ, June 6, 2010



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they work in the state or private sector, but it is no indicator of their personal behaviour.³²

Authentically ‘walking the talk’ is, I suggest, easier said than done. *How, then, may we begin to grasp the nearest edge of making significant change in our lives that may impact positively on our planet and its peoples? Perhaps reflecting and then acting on the broader intent behind Mahatma Gandhi’s mantra is a positive first step:*

When you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test:

*Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man
whom you may have seen, and ask yourself;
is the step you contemplate, going to be of any use to him?
Will he gain anything by it?
Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny?
In other words, will it lead to ‘Swaraj’³³ for the hungry
and spiritually starving millions?
Then you will find your doubt and your ‘self’ melting away.*

³² Kerr, Roger, ‘What’s this individualism all about?’, speech to Christchurch Businessman’s Club, April, 1997

³³ **Swaraj can mean generally self-determination** or ‘home-rule’ (swa- ‘self’, raj- ‘rule’), but the word usually refers to Mahatma Gandhi’s concept for Indian independence from foreign domination.[1] **Swaraj lays stress on governance not by a hierarchical government, but self governance through individuals and community building.** Source: Wikipedia.



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Study Guide

The Two Crabs

One fine day, two crabs came out from their home to take a stroll on the sand. 'Child,' said the mother, 'you are walking very ungracefully. You should accustom yourself to walking straight forward without twisting from side to side.'

'Pray, mother,' said the young crab, 'do but set the example yourself, and I will follow you.' Leading by example is the best guideline. (*Aesop's Fables*)

Changing buying habits and consumerist thinking won't happen overnight; rather, such radical changes in ingrained lifestyle living take conscious effort. Never before have such issues as climate change, unfree labour exploitation and over consumption been so much in the forefront of media attention. In addition, advice on living more frugally and returning to basic skills such as gardening and cooking fill websites, bookshop shelves and public speaking engagements. Are we in danger of 'information overload', where we are endlessly reading and reflecting, but slow to change and act?

The message is clear: the western world is burdened by unsustainable over-consumption. Moreover, our excess is harming our global home and many of our universal neighbours. We urgently need to reduce the amount we purchase and discard—***whatever we buy, use, consume or discard comes at an unseen price.***

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

A first step in changing to a simpler lifestyle is to *stop, think, and let ourselves be guided* by the following questions:

- *Do I really need this?*
- *Will I use this?*
- *Who or what may have been harmed by this item's production?*
- *Can I buy this second-hand or recycled?*

Test the practicalities of these questions for your life.

1. *Choose a few examples of products you might be tempted to buy (or have recently bought) and apply those four questions.*
2. *What is the hardest question for you to answer about your consuming? Why do you think this might be?*



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