



CHALLENGING CONSUMER CULTURE **A conversation with the American church.** **By Christine Roush**

Despite our best efforts, few of us can claim immunity from the consumerist culture in which we live. In fact, according to the title of a recent report from researcher George Barna – “Faith Has Limited Effect of Most People’s Behavior” – Christian believers often look much like everybody else.

Even though God has previously said a word or two about how his followers are to use their blessings, it may be the economic meltdown of 2008-2009 that finally gets our attention.

After personally wrestling with stewardship and consumerism for more than two decades in ministry, I am now convinced it is the most important topic facing the church.

Consider these facts about American culture:

- Half of all new marriages in the U.S. dissolve within the first five years. Over 85 percent of those divorcing say their number one problem was money.
- Children 8-17 average slightly more than a dozen trips to the mall each month and spend about \$3,600 there each year. Meanwhile, three billion people on earth live on less than \$2 a day.
- Home sizes grew from an average of 750 square feet in 1950 to 2,000 square feet in 1989.
- While personal bankruptcy rates reached all-time highs during the past decade, personal savings rates reached all-time lows since the Great Depression.
- The average U.S. household owns 2.8 cars.
- The number of home foreclosures increased 75 percent in 2007, followed by record numbers in both 2008 and 2009.

In stark contrast, the Bible talks about the value of saving for the future, giving generously to the poor, the sick, and the downtrodden, not letting our stuff become the top priority in our lives, and keeping a focus on people.

Despite all this, the church remains remarkably silent on issues of consumerism and stewardship. While God understood the misery wrought by consumerist tendencies, God's church seems reluctant to challenge the assumptions of our culture. Pastors themselves struggle with managing their finances, and an alarming number of recent seminary graduates seem to wrestle with God's Word on giving personally.

The church must address these issues. The never-ending quest for the newest, the best, and the boldest has driven large numbers of pew sitters to work more hours, owe more money, and spend less time on the things that God says matter: our families, our communities, and the world's poorest residents.

Though few churches remain silent on what God has to say about personal morality and sexuality, only a handful adequately address what we do with all that God has given us: our time, our resources, our families, our neighbors, and our planet. At the same time, leading Christian writers on stewardship, such as Larry Burkett, Wes Willmer, Mark Vincent, and Howard Dayton, remind us that God has given us an equally strong message on the subject of stewardship. We have simply chosen not to focus on it.

Churches choosing to tackle the culture head-on can start by adding themes of stewardship and the cost of consumerism into a year-round ministry plan. Pastors could start preaching sermon series on everything from what the Bible says about important uses of our time to biblical principles of saving, avoiding debt, and caring for the earth. Small groups could read Bible studies on stewardship themes or books that address the topic of consumerism and culture. (Craig Blomberg's *Heart, Soul, and Money* and my book, *Swimming Upstream: Reflections on Consumerism and Culture*, are both good places to start.)

Children's ministries could begin introducing the concept of giving generously to neighbors in need, and youth programs could encourage young people to consider lives focused on mission and service rather than debt and accumulation. Families could be encouraged to consider the true costs of their purchasing choices: the hours they will need to work to pay for purchases, and the natural resources those purchases use.

It is time for a Romans 12 movement, a movement aimed at transforming us from the cultural values of consumption and accumulation to a renewing of our minds toward God's values and God's priorities.

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