

Would you like fries with that?

by Robert Griffith

I'm sure you are aware that at times God needs to offend our mind in order to reveal our hearts. On that basis ... I pray that this will be the most offensive sermon you've ever encountered!

I think that the greatest ideological threat to the Church in the 21st Century Western World is not atheism, communism, or even false doctrines promoted by those who want to discard biblical truth and faith. The greatest threat to the Church is the worldview of consumerism.

In this worldview the self is lord. This worldview sees life in terms of shopping: life should present me with the greatest number of goods and services for the least amount of personal expense. Life is directed by my desire to possess and acquire goods and services based on my personal choice. Life is one big shopping mall.

The basic assumption is: *"If I can have everything I want, and avoid that which I don't want, then I will be happy."* This worldview has invaded the Christian mind. It afflicts every denomination from the most conservative to the most liberal.

Jesus Christ challenges this worldview. He says real life is about denying one's self, dying to one's self on a daily basis. Being a Christian means we stop living like we control everything and we give ourselves up to Jesus Christ, freely, voluntarily and willingly. We give up our autonomy in submission to Christ and His body, the Church. We live in holy obedience to Jesus and in mutual submission with our brothers and sisters.

In that community we experience true freedom: freedom from sin, guilt, meaninglessness and death. But this Biblical Christianity is threatened by a subtle, deceptive, toxic substitute: CONSUMER CHRISTIANITY.

Consumer Christianity is a mentality or worldview which is self-centred. One who is a consumer is concerned with the benefits to himself or herself of whatever they buy or believe. Therefore, for the consumer to become interested in the product or service or belief system, it must appeal to their personal interests, concerns, felt needs and opinions. Consumerism has a mentality of control. As consumers, we only invest in something we can continue to control. We want to see results and monuments to our investment!

The consumer always dictates the quality, style, nature and terms of the product or service they will purchase or support. The demand is for benefits which affirm personal preferences and opinion. In other words, it is hinged upon our feelings and desires, not objective Truth.

This form of Christianity is idolatrous ... it's unbiblical and it's an insidious, largely invisible cancer which has been attacking the heart of the Church in this nation and across the western world for the last 20 years or more. We see this in how Consumer Christians view their involvement in the Church: *'Provide me with the service/product I want in exchange for my money, my approval and my commitment.'*

The best analogy I can find in our day and age is McDonalds. In our society McDonald's has become the epitome of the consumer experience.

The most successful fast food chain in the world has learned that to appeal to consumers you have to offer lots of menu choices designed to please many different tastes and appetites.

It can't cost too much.

You don't want to entangle the customer with any intimacy or relationships - they don't have to form a relationship with a server, just step up to the counter, order, get the product ... and walk away ... once you've paid your money ... there's no obligation ... no requirements ... no expectation from McDonalds that you will do anything other enjoy your meal and tell others about it.

I wish this wasn't such a good analogy for the modern Church ... but it is.

Now, in order to retain members, the Church is becoming 'McDonaldised'. We try to offer what McDonalds does:

- Lot's of menu choices designed to please our appetites and personal tastes. Give the people what they want.
- Hold down the price of commitment in time and money.
- The tendency to avoid intimacy. That's why many people love the mega-church environment where they can be anonymous consumers. You never have to get to know anyone! And you most certainly want to avoid those intimidating relationship games people try to thrust your way.

That's the kind of Christianity that most people want today: McChurch. We are a nation of McChristians! The Church is dying from its addiction to spiritual fast food.

When we are Christian Consumers ...

- We want lots of choices which we pick from a menu of programs. Our decisions about church are based on personal taste and preference. And in this 'enlightened' post-denominational era in which we live ... we can pick and choose activities across several Churches now. Listen to how a Church driven by taste quickly becomes something other than and expression of real Christianity. Paul summed it up very well in 2 Timothy 4:3-4:

"For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."

- We see ourselves as individuals who have no intimate relationship with others in the body of believers and when activities or programs emerge which are designed to break down barriers and encourage us to form those relationships, we resist them ... or just stay away.
- We believe the reason for the church's existence is to meet our felt needs. We may never be so bold as to say so ... but our actions reveal our heart. The Church is viewed as providing a product or a service: good spiritual feelings, self-help programs, activities for our children and youth, practical advice for living successfully ... the list goes on.
- When we don't feel like we are getting our money's worth or the proper service ... when our children's needs or our needs are not being fully met ... we start looking around at other Churches and we select a youth group here, a service there, a mission tent over here, a home group there. Until we end up committed to activities ... spiritual products ... and we don't care where we get them from and we don't seem to notice what that consumer attitude does to the fibre and relationships within the local Church. Instead, we just allow the spirit of the age to dictate to us: "Give me what I want and you will keep my business ... provide appropriate activities for my children or I will find them in another Church across town and send them there whist continuing to fool myself into thinking I am committed to this local Church."

I like Red Rooster's chicken, Burger King's Onion Rings and McDonalds Ice Cream ... so I just drive through each one ... pick what I like from their menu and drive on to the next one. That's fine for fast food outlets ... but that attitude is killing Churches and robbing us the power we need to really take this city for Christ.

- The consumer Christian's motto becomes *"Ask not what I can do for the Church, but what can this Church do for me.. and my children?"* And if you don't like the answer ... then simply ask someone else in town!
- Our loyalty to the local church is like the loyalty we might have to a restaurant – if another restaurant offers more menu items or choices that please us more, then we feel no compulsion to remain loyal. Personal taste and preference rule our final choices ... because deep down, we are just consumers.

Christians who have not crucified the worldly values of a consumer society in their own lives will believe that the Gospel and the Church exist for their personal benefit. They continually demand to be fed – consciously and more often than not, subconsciously in the way they think, speak and act.

If the 'shepherd' does not provide food to their tastes, they start grumbling and complaining, and stirring up strife against the pastor or teacher ... or, if they love and respect the pastor and don't want to speak ill of him ... they simply slip away and have an affair with another pastor or two or three and feel that this is better than complaining or grumbling.

A hundred years ago, we had a small handful of separate Churches in most cities. Now, there are dozens in each town. Why? Because consumer Christianity has replaced New Testament Christianity. Consumer Christians had all they could enjoy of one Church and so they started another ... and another ... and another.

In the last Church I pastured, we had people leaving all the time. Some of them moved out of town to other jobs and new horizons ... however, over the 15 years I was there, I can say that the vast majority of people who left our Church, remained in the same city. They simply changed restaurants because either the menu or their taste changed and so they found a new place to dine!

The concept of covenant commitment through thick and thin has been so largely eroded in the Western Christian mindset that if you even talk about local Church loyalty now, most people call you parochial or accuse you of peddling a denominational band-wagon. Worse still – they say you are against Church unity because you talk about being committed to one Church. They think Church unity is when you form superficial relationships with lots of Christians all over town ... attend whatever exciting activity there is – whenever and wherever it happens and be all things to all men to such an extreme that they end up being nothing to nobody!

Consumer sheep are not interested in covenant commitment. They are not concerned about God's will (if it does not benefit them), for they are too pre-occupied with their own self-centred concerns. It is sad to say that prosperity gives people entirely too much time to be concerned about themselves rather than about God's will and other people.

'Successful' consumer ministry is 'evidenced' by the numbers of followers and other carnal and societal evidences which follow the worldview of hedonism, materialism and subjectivism which results in personality cults, the prosperity gospel and emphasis upon the 'evidence' of experience rather than the Truth of the Word of God. A growing number of these 'successful' consumer gospel teachers tell the people what they want to hear, and cater to their self pre-occupation and victim mentality. The moment they quit teaching in that manner, they lose the crowd.

It happened in my Church in 1993. People were flooding in the door every week ... so many that we had to move out of our Church building into a large hall. It seemed that we were the flavour of the month as people dined out on our teaching and worship style. I warned the leadership of our Church that this was a bubble waiting to burst ... this was not good ... these people were not new converts ... this was not Church growth ... this new crowd were just shopping for a product and enjoying the flavour of our french fries ... and as soon as that flavour or their tastes change ... they will be gone.

Sure enough ... when I started using words like 'responsibility', 'maturity', 'commitment', 'loyalty', 'submission' and 'accountability' ... the bubble burst and there were bodies everywhere ... trampled in the rush to get out the door ... as they continued their search for a more palatable flavour of spiritual food.

A new Church was started in town and they experienced tremendous growth and they were praising God for 'adding to their number' and 'blessing them' with so many new families during their first year. God didn't bless them with anyone! Almost 90% of those new families came from my Church and others around the city ... after they could have all of us they could enjoy and decided to switch to a different restaurant. Why are we so blind that we give God glory for the divisive work of Satan?

Consumer Christians are willing to do God's 'will' if God does all the work and it does not upset our schedule and priorities. Of course, we will never admit that, we just live it whilst spouting all the spiritually correct things.

Consumer Christianity promises freedom and fulfilment through unlimited individual choices and 'getting just what we want'. It is actually not freedom at all ... it is a form of slavery to personal desires. It appeals to the chains of the sinful nature: greed, covetousness, self-centeredness. There is no freedom in consumer Christianity. Instead you become a slave to selfishness. All those choices don't offer fulfilment!

Consumerism promises freedom and fulfilment in the self-centred life. But Jesus says that is a lie. REAL life comes when we give ourselves away to Jesus and to others.

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:24-26)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, *"When Christ bids a man to follow him, he bids him, 'Come and die.'*

Following Jesus is not about pampering the self-will, it is about putting the self-will to death. But when we truly follow Jesus in this way, I testify to you that there is true joy, freedom and abundant life! In losing our lives, we truly do gain REAL life!

The models provided for AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY in the Bible are the family and the body ... not the 'McChurch' fast food model we see today. Paul compared the church to the family when he wrote to Timothy:

"If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." (1 Timothy 5:5)

Being in a family involves being vulnerable, real and transparent. Nobody knows you as well as the people in your family. Living in a family limits our freedom as we don't just look after our own interests, but the interests of others.

"For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone." (Romans 14:7).

"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak." (1 Corinthians 8:9)

It's like being married. Being in the covenant of marriage limits our choices. We give up some of our freedom and autonomy. We can't date any longer. Our time is not completely our own. But in that covenant there is the blessing of intimacy, pleasure, joy, companionship, security and love. It can only exist in the covenant that limits our freedom! As soon as you want the freedom to have the same relationship with someone else, you destroy the covenant.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Ephesians 5:21)

The body is another powerful analogy for authentic Christianity. Being in a 'body' means that we depend on one another, are connected to one another, and are intimately involved in each other's lives. We hurt with one another and celebrate with one another.

"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:4,5)

Being a part of the body means a deep sharing in one another's lives. We correct one another's sins and carry one another's burdens.

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:1-2)

Are you a consumer Christian, standing at the counter of McChurch, surveying the menu and deciding what you will choose or commit to based on your own personal hunger and appetite? Or are you a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ who has made a commitment to God and to your local Church fellowship and signed up for whatever comes ... whether you like it or not ... whether it meets your felt needs or not?

Is your Christian walk about having your needs met or giving your self away in service to Jesus Christ?

When most people hear a message like this (well actually, most people don't hear messages like this ... because most preachers wouldn't preach this ... but that aside ...) many just think this applies to people who leave Churches and go somewhere else that meets their needs better. That is certainly one of the most common manifestations of consumer Christianity and that continues to happen in almost every Church. But in case you think you are off the hook today if you are not thinking of leaving your Church ... this consumer mentality is far more subtle than that and it can permeate every aspect of Church life.

We can certainly make big choices like which Church we will attend based on our own self-serving desires ... but there are a hundred little choices too:

How regularly we attend services.

How committed we are to Home Group.

How much we give when the plate comes around.

How much we participate when there is an opportunity to share.

How much we enter into worship and connect with God when we are together.

How much we open in up in Home Group and allow people to really get to know us.

How firm we are with our children when they start getting restless and want to go to this youth service ... that concert ... another youth group ... without any thought about what we are really saying to them about Church when we say yes to those requests ... or how much pressure we put on other families in our Church by allowing our children to dictate what they want and need ... when others are not given that freedom.

All these choices can be governed by what WE want to do ... what WE feel comfortable with and what WE think will benefit US and our family ... without any regard to what is RIGHT and appropriate and God-honouring.

What would happen if for just one week ... just one week ... every one of us made choices every moment of every day based on the needs of others and deliberately ignored our own tastes, desires, felt needs and personal preferences ... I wonder how different life would be. I wonder what differences we would see if just for one week, this consumer mentality which permeates so much of what we do, how we think and how we live ... could be removed.

I want to close by sharing some words which are literally hundreds of years old. They are some words penned by one of the greatest preachers and evangelists of all time, John Wesley, as he challenges Christians to make a covenant to each other and to God as we take the yoke of Christ upon us ... and by inference we will lay aside the yoke of consumer Christianity at the same time. You can say amen to this if your heart dictates ... or you can come back to the message later and chew on what I have shared more until you see what I see ... and what I believe God sees in the 21st Century western Church.

From John Wesley:

And now, beloved, let us bind ourselves with willing bonds to our covenant God, and take the yoke of Christ upon us. This taking of his yoke upon us means that we are heartily content that he appoint us our place and work, and that he alone be our reward.

Christ has many services to be done; some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and temporal interests, others are contrary to both. In some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Yet the power to do all these things is assuredly given us in Christ, who strengthens us.

Therefore let us make the covenant of God our own. Let us engage our heart to the Lord, and resolve in his strength never to go back. Being thus prepared, let us now, in sincere dependence on his grace and trusting in his promises, yield ourselves anew to him this day:

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

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