

THE PROBLEM OF ECONOMICS IN A SINFUL WORLD: HOW AMERICAN CHRISTIANS
FIT IN THE CONTEXT OF CAPITALISM

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Abstract

In this sinful world, a system of economics cannot exist without problems. To demonstrate this, the two most current and prominent systems of economics, socialism and capitalism, are compared. Under socialism, there tends to be extreme centralized control and minimal drive for the individual. Under capitalism, the poor are left to fend for themselves while the wealthy become wealthier. Christians are called to live under these systems. Just as biblical scholars investigate the context of a verse to better understand it, Christians need to know their economic context to understand their unique challenges in living and proclaiming the gospel as individuals and as a church. Since American Christians live under capitalism, the focus of this paper narrows to the challenges they face today from their capitalist context. Capitalism has led to five detrimental beliefs in the United States: individualism, materialism, consumerism, successism, and postmodernism. Each one of these beliefs pulls American Christians away from a biblical understanding of living truly secure, fulfilling, successful, meaningful and interdependent lives.

In our present struggle against the influence of capitalism, we hope to remove any tendencies that cause the church to feel and act fake or superficial. Instead we do what we can to present and encourage the very real church that God has made us a part of. We strive to show our faith in our lives in a deep and meaningful way. We show genuine hospitality, commitment, care, and concern for others just as much as we would for ourselves. We run away from those things that cheapen the gospel and make the church into just another heartless business of capitalism.

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Introduction

Growing up in a multi-cultural family has its positives and negatives. From the very beginning, I was raised with an understanding that the world was bigger than just the United States of America. My mother moved to the United States when she married my father at the age of 21. With her came traditions, beliefs, and values that were very different from the culture on this side of the ocean. I grew up aware of the fact that there is more than one way to see things. However, being raised in two very different cultures left me feeling like a misfit in either culture by itself.

As I grew up, I had the privilege of living in Sweden with my family for two years. There I experienced for myself a very different way of viewing economics and culture. In college, I spent six months living in Sweden all on my own. When I returned to America, the contrast between the capitalist economic system of America and the socialist system of Sweden was glaring to me. I noticed many beliefs and values in the U.S. that most Americans could not have imagined any differently. However, from my time in Sweden, I knew that many of these things were not as universal as many Americans thought.

Since making this realization, I have observed many occurrences in our American society that seem to come out of this constant battle to survive and find security, not as a community, but as individuals charged with the task of taking care of themselves. With this mentality so prevalent and unnoticed, could there be assumptions and limitations put on Christians by a capitalist worldview that twist a true understanding of what Christianity looks like? This idea is what led to the selection of the topic for my thesis.

As I began my research for this paper, I was amazed at the wealth of material written on this very topic by many historians and evangelicals. Many have observed a shift in how Christians see their role in the community. Because the capitalist mentality is one of extreme independence and individuality, the community sense of our churches has been drastically reduced. The outpouring of gifts, compassion, and time for one another is more of an exception than a standard. The church is less often seen as a place where we can have real and meaningful relationships, but rather as a dispensing machine for the means of grace on Sunday and nothing more. Both of these observations follow the trend of businesses and of individuals who order themselves to be most efficient in a cold and calculated way to achieve maximum success.

I have ordered my paper into an ever-narrowing scope of focus. I begin by comparing socialism and capitalism to highlight problems every economic system faces and attempts to solve. No matter what system one lives under, problems and injustice remain. In the second part, I narrow the focus to the economic situation of American Christians. We live in the context of capitalism and therefore need to take a closer look at the values and concepts that permeate our everyday existence. Taking these principles, I compare and contrast them to the principles we find in Scripture. In the final part, I present some conclusions on how I think the church can reclaim and proclaim the true value of being part of the body of Christ.

Literature Review

When I began searching for books and articles by pairing the word “Christianity” with key words such as “capitalism, socialism, economics, and community,” I was amazed at the amount of literature available. Evangelicals especially have written quite a bit about their own church and its journey alongside capitalism. One of the books that I have included in this paper, *What Ever Happened to Commitment*, by Edward Dayton, is especially interesting as it was written during the boom of evangelicalism. Dayton calls out a warning to his fellow Evangelicals that they beware the consequences of adapting the church to a capitalist model. He foresees the shallowness in message and living that will result from adapting a business-like mentality toward church. He specifically attacks the lack of depth present in relationships within the church.

Other more recent books have addressed the issue in more depth and in more areas of Christian living and ministry. *The Economy of Desire*, by Daniel Bell, paints a very thorough overview of how the principles of capitalism have thoroughly infected every aspect of Christianity in America. *The Great Giveaway*, by David Fitch, charges the church with “giving away” what made it different from the rest of the world. Fitch systematically addresses every area of ministry and points out what has been lost by adopting capitalist principles and beliefs. Many other articles exist that briefly cover a specific area of ministry that has suffered or benefited from the principles learned from our capitalist context.

When looking for confessional Lutheran writings on the issues of capitalism and its effects on Christians, especially in the United States, I found very few results. A few articles and papers have been written and a few books briefly touch the topic, but I see a need for a thorough treatment of the subject to be done from a confessional Lutheran standpoint. I made

use of what existed and hope that what I have written may help clarify some of the issues presented for those who approach these problems with a confessional Lutheran background.

In preparation for writing on economics, I had to do some background reading on the history and principles of economics as a whole. I found an overabundance of things to read about the development of different economic systems and their historical implementations. I sampled what I could and spent a little extra time delving into the principles behind both capitalism and socialism. I also reviewed some of the historical details of how different versions of these systems have played out in different countries. There is so much more that could be digested.

The older material tends to be quite dated and tainted by a deeply fearful view of attacks on capitalism by socialists. In fear of communist infiltrators and sympathizers, proponents of the United States vehemently defended every aspect of capitalism. I feel that many of their arguments err a great deal from a true presentation of the topic. Therefore, I would recommend that those who want to pursue this topic further search for recent writings published within the last 10-15 years. Before that, the material doesn't apply as well to the capitalist system that exists in present day America. One example of this is Edmund Opitz's book, *Religion and Capitalism: Allies, Not Enemies*.

Overall, the literature available pertaining to Christianity and capitalism is pretty outstanding. I could do a full year of research pertaining to the topic and still have more to read. What I spent considerable time with was those books that specifically address the principles of capitalism and compare them with the principles laid out in Scripture for Christians. Those that spend the most time analyzing churches today and how they have adapted capitalist principles for growth and efficiency were of special interest to me. All in all, I feel this is a topic that needs to be evaluated again and again as the church continually strives to be in the world but not of it.¹

Disclaimer

In this paper, I want it to be understood from the outset that the purpose of analyzing the negative effects of capitalism on American Christians is not to advocate a different economic system as a better choice for our country. Rather, the reason I tackle this topic is to fairly evaluate the unique situation American Christians face in their capitalist society today. I

¹ John 17:13-18

am not denying the fact that capitalism "works," but I do deny the belief that this gives capitalism a free pass from all criticism or thorough analysis.

As the Christian tradition suggests—not to mention the tapestry of history—the peril of wealth, of the disordered desire that is avarice, precedes and will no doubt outlive capitalism. However, that capitalism is not the root of all economic evil does not mean that it gets a pass, any more than the suggestion that the poor will always be with us means we can safely ignore them.²

Since capitalism is the system we live under, I believe it is good to take a thorough look at the effects it may have on how Christians view ourselves and our neighbor, our church and our God. The better we understand our own context, the better we can evaluate the views we hold and see if they coincide with our faith or not. In what ways does capitalism *allow* and *encourage* a biblical understanding of ourselves and the world around us? In what ways does capitalism *prevent* or *hinder* a true biblical understanding? These are good questions to ask. Just as we spend time taking a deep look into the textual and cultural context of each passage of Scripture, we should faithfully examine our own context as American Christians living in a capitalist society. I ask that my readers attempt to take an honest look at themselves and fairly evaluate how big an impact the principles of capitalism have had on their values and perception of themselves, others, the church, and God himself.

I. The Problem of Economics: A Comparison of Socialism and Capitalism

Basics of Economy

Some basic principles of economics fall under three categories: scarcity, production and allocation.³ The principle of scarcity states that the wants of a society are greater than the resources available. Even though we live on a planet still filled with many untapped and renewable resources, there is never enough available for all to have to their hearts' content. Part of that lies in humanity's insatiable desire for more. Any form of economics is built on the principle that there are wants to be fulfilled. The scarcity of resources creates supply and demand. The second principle is production. Production is the process of finding, creating or sustaining resources. Whether resources exist or not, it does the populace no good if there is no process of production to make those resources available. The more production a country

² Dan Bell, *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 27.

³ Jim Halteman, *Market Capitalism and Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 34.

or company has, the more resources are available to the economy. Those who work in the process of production also become a vital resource to make the economic wheel turn. The last and most variable element of each economic system is allocation. Allocation is the process of distributing resources to people. Allocation of resources depends on what is valued most in a society or who has the power. Who decides who gets what? Should everyone share their resources? How much? Should sharing be legislated or left to the individual to decide? Can the government provide a market that allows everyone to have resources if they work for them? Jim Halteman lists six ways in which allocation has been done throughout history:

1. The first to come is the first served.
2. Distribution is based on need.
3. Everyone gets an equal share.
4. Those who are close to or friends with those in power get more resources, otherwise known as cronyism.
5. All out war to decide who gets the goods.
6. Resources are auctioned off to the highest bidder.⁴

You might recognize these different ways of allocating in different countries around the world. Communism's principles fit with the third option. Socialism fits better with the second option. Capitalism embodies the sixth option. Each attempts to distribute scarce resources to its people using a different method. What values and reasoning lie behind each one of these? In the next section, we will take a closer look at the underlying views of socialism and capitalism to see how each one attempts to solve the problem of limited resources in an ever hungry world.

No matter how you try to get around it, every economic system has values built into it. The main job of economics is to satisfy the desires of the people it serves. Therefore, whether decided beforehand or after the fact, economics reacts to the needs and wants of those it serves. If people value the well-being of every person, then built into the economic system will be ways for that to happen. If the emphasis is on the individual having access to anything he needs to establish his well-being through his hard work, then the system will go to great lengths to make that possible. Both socialism and capitalism set values on what is most important to the people it serves. Yet, both systems run with very different ideas in an attempt to satisfy what is believed to be the essentials for human existence. For a quick overview of what these systems are built on, we will focus on the underlying view of each toward man, community, and God. What place do these three have in their system? Understanding the beliefs of each system helps us to understand why they look so different

⁴ Halteman, 36.

from each other.

Capitalism

Of the two systems, capitalism is certainly older than socialism. Socialism as a real and functioning economic system didn't show its face until the 20th century. It is a little harder to pin down the start of capitalism since its principles existed long before. However, capitalism as we know it today is only a few centuries old.⁵ In the modern age, as monarchies fell and the oppressive feudal systems were on their way out, the new middle class wanted a system of economics that was fair and equal. No longer would they put up with a top-down, no-questions-asked distribution of their wealth. They had won rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The appealing light of these rights shone from the Statue of Liberty to the peoples of the world. Immigrants came to America, seeking a place where they were free to seek their own destiny and throw off all the constraints of the past.

Capitalism is built on this idea: We are the masters of our own destiny. Fed up with corrupt monarchs and oppressive leaders, Americans wanted nothing more than to decide their own fate. True capitalism removes constraints or obligations to any other and makes it a person's job to earn his own future. Intrinsic to the "American Dream" is the promise of capitalism: Here, you can start over and be successful. No one will be your boss. You decide your future. If you work hard, you can make your dreams a reality. Nothing stands in your way. The individual is supreme. No matter who you are, you deserve an opportunity to satisfy your dreams. It is not up to a government, a monarch, or any other form of state to dictate where you work or what you do with your pay check. That is your freedom as an individual. Capitalism is all about removing constraint so that you can do what you want. It is called a free market because it is not controlled or regulated by anyone but you. On the flipside, you are the only one who can make your success a reality.

So is there any thought given to the community as a whole? What about those who are not successful? Capitalism does not include a mandatory obligation to support others. Each individual has a responsibility to take care of themselves. Those who defend capitalism will quickly say that the more successful individuals are, the more opportunity they inevitably create for the community around them. Any restrictions placed on the wealthy will only hinder success and decrease work ethic and efficiency. Therefore, in the capitalist mindset,

⁵ C. T. Kurien, "Capitalism and Socialism: A Reconsideration" (Ecumenical Review 43, no. 3, July 1, 1991), 309.

not having a mandatory obligation to support others actually creates a better chance of success for others. This way, freedom is not taken away from the individual. Each person can choose whether to help others or simply ignore them. Is there help available in a capitalist society? Sometimes. It depends if there are individuals who have a reason—moral, religious, or profitable—to help out their neighbor. Overall, the success of the capitalist system has increased the living standard for most in America. Proponents will point to this when attacked by critics.

What does capitalism say about God? As far as capitalist economics are concerned, it does not matter whether a god created all things or causes things to happen. Economists operate from what is seen. What they see is individuals going to work and doing their job, getting paid, and making a life for themselves. Prices go up and down based on trends and data. Practically speaking, whether God is watching over the market or not, things go on the same way. If he does have a place in capitalism, it is as a hidden God. He works behind the scenes, using the vehicle of our economics to produce the maximum good in a sinful world. Dan Bell describes it this way: “Life is providentially ordered such that the most good is produced by individuals pursuing their own maximal gain.”⁶ Basically, God is not seen as the cause of success, but because the system is successful, if there is a God, he must be working through it. This view of God fits well into the Deistic faith of our country’s founders and most other religions. It is so vague that even those who reject God outright can tolerate it.

Because of capitalism’s emphasis on the individual’s unbridled freedom to forge his own destiny without any built in checks and balances, it is inevitable that certain individuals will become more successful than others. Over time a minority of the most successful rise to the top. The majority enjoys only a minimal fraction of the total wealth of the country. This stark contrast between the wealthy and everyone else only increases as more opportunities for success are accessible only to those with significant means. This can be readily seen in the United States. More about this unfortunate consequence will be explored in the next section. This is brought up here to understand why socialism essentially was created to remedy the “problems” of capitalism. C. T. Kurien puts the dilemma this way:

Because of its very nature, [capitalism] is an economic system that lends itself to be captured by a minority (globally and even within countries where it is the prevailing order) who, because of the resource power they command and which the system augments, come to exercise dominion over the majority. It will not only be a tragedy, but an affront to human ingenuity if capitalism has to be thought of as the only

⁶ Bell, 112.

possible economic order even in the future.⁷

When one sees capitalism this way, captured by a minority of the wealthy, it seems to have reverted to the very evil that it sought to do away with. The driving force of so many moving to the United States early on was to get away from a small group ruling their lives. In America, they would be free to seek their own fortune. Unintentionally, capitalism paved the way for certain extra successful individuals to retake the power and influence over others.

Many market economies (including the United States, United Kingdom, and China) are becoming more and more unequal in distribution of wealth in a way that dangerously centralizes power and tends to neglect the poor.⁸

Through its removal of all constraints or moral obligations, capitalism does not have a way to maintain the rights of the many over the few. Wealth determines the amount of freedom you have.

While capitalism has its faults, one cannot deny the productive power that it has introduced to our world. Never before has such growth manifested itself so quickly and for so long. The work ethic of its people, channeling the inner desire for more and promoting individual creativity, has shown itself to be very powerful. “No economic order to date has so obviously displayed such an enormous productive capacity as has capitalism. Hence, when the empirical question put to capitalism is, ‘does it work?’ there really is no debate; the obvious answer is yes.”⁹ Whether it teaches good values or promotes bad ones, the system does work as far as economics is concerned. It has provided a higher living standard for the majority of its people by the huge increase in wealth and resources available. Even though some are much poorer than others, the price for most resources has been dramatically reduced because of their abundance, and as such these resources have become much more accessible even to the less successful.

Socialism

Because of the inconsistencies and weaknesses perceived in capitalism, there were visionaries and philosophers who were not content to believe the world had achieved the best possible way to do economics. They dared to dream that humanity was destined to achieve

⁷ Kurien, 313.

⁸ Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics: Why are Christians Missing the Chance to Really Change the World?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 143.

⁹ Bell, 84.

even greater things. Those who created and advocated socialism, attempted to harness the power of capitalism but add constraints so that each individual would maintain their ability to lead a “good and prosperous life.” “Pre-capitalist orders kept humanity essentially at subsistence level; capitalism, with all its contradictions and weaknesses, would bless humanity with an abundance of things; socialism by raising that abundance into affluence would take humanity from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. So ran one line of thought.”¹⁰ They recognized what capitalism had done; it moved its people from desperation to different stages of abundance. However, the visionaries of socialism saw true freedom as still untapped. Individuals in the capitalist system were still slaves to the fight for survival.¹¹ Capitalists had to play a game of “who wants it more”, grabbing and taking to secure personal survival. This did not seem like freedom, they argued. Even though it attempted to do away with a “top-down” distribution of wealth, inevitably history repeated itself in a new way. No longer were monarchs or tyrants at the top because of their blood or charisma, but now those who had built a monetary empire reigned supreme over those less fortunate. A system built on the exchange of resources automatically gives power to the one who holds more in his purse. What about those who have little if any resources in monetary form or inherent in their ability to work, i.e. their “production value?” Capitalism does not in itself provide an answer for the less fortunate. It does not claim that everyone or anyone is inherently good, but merely that individuals will do what is advantageous for themselves. Its main principle stands alone, “Each individual creates his own destiny.”

“Socialism, it may be recalled, was not meant as a substitute for capitalism, but as its successor.”¹² Those who drew up this new concept believed that capitalism had introduced some amazing new things to the world. They recognized the sheer power of the capitalist system to harness an immense amount of production ability and through it, to make more resources available for the market of its people. However, they saw capitalism as an imperfect and incomplete system. It was a stepping stone to the next great evolution of human existence and coexistence. Was there a way to keep the production power of capitalism and also provide all people with the basic needs and rights they were entitled to?

¹⁰ Kurien, 313.

¹¹ Eric Fromm and Karl Marx, *Marx's concept of man* (New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing, 1961); available from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/fromm/works/1961/man/>; Internet; accessed February 8, 2014. “A being does not regard himself as independent unless he is his own master, and he is only his own master when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the favor of another considers himself a dependent being.”

¹² Kurien, 313.

Socialists believed it could be done.

At the core of beliefs behind socialism, there is a strong brand of humanism. Already from the outset, the premise behind “evolving” to a better state assumes that we as humans are capable of more. The visionaries of this “experiment” believed that people are inherently good and given the opportunity would work to not only help themselves but to be morally responsible citizens to one another.¹³ From a Christian standpoint, we recognize a problem with this line of thinking from the outset: According to the Bible, “no one is good, not even one.”¹⁴ However, it must be acknowledged that even if not done for the right reasons, there are many non-Christians who strive after civil righteousness. In the eyes of the world, it may seem that many are good and responsible to themselves and to others. Sinful human beings do strive by nature to prove that they are good. One of the greatest deceptions of the devil is this very thing: that humans do not need help from a god, but are capable of being an ever-improving race headed to self-made perfection. In Europe, this attitude can be readily seen. They often consider themselves more understanding, more advanced, and more civilized because of their more inclusive and caring socialist system. Socialists believe that their system is superior to capitalism because it provides the opportunity for individuals to work towards something greater. In capitalism, they claim, people are left to a primal battle of survival, no closer to acting civilized toward one another than a pair of tigers fighting over a scrap of meat. Everyone is left to fend for themselves and encouraged to feed their own selfish desires. Socialists claim that humanity can do better. Not only can individuals strive toward working hard for themselves, but they also have a moral obligation to carry the wounded and the elderly through the battle of life. This idea manifests itself in their emphasis on providing for the needs of all, regardless of productivity or efficiency. It is fairly concluded then, that the focus of socialism shifts from the individual to the community.

The highest priority in socialism becomes the community. From this, they claim,

¹³ Phil Gasper, “Marxism, morality, and human nature: Marx rejected bourgeois morality in favor of human emancipation,” *International Socialist Review* 82; available from <http://isreview.org/issue/82/marxism-morality-and-human-nature>; Internet; accessed February 8, 2014. “The idea that violence and war have always been part of human society may seem like common sense... Warfare became a feature of human society only as a consequence of specific historical developments—crucially the establishment of permanent settlements with accumulated wealth, and the emergence of ‘social hierarchy, an elite, perhaps with its own interests and rivalries.’ Rather than war being the expression of some general human propensity towards violence, it reflects the interests of those at the top of society who are most likely to benefit from it. Evidence of this kind supports the view that human beings are not naturally violent, selfish, competitive, greedy, or xenophobic, it is not natural for human societies to be organized hierarchically or for women to have lower social status than men, and capitalism does not exist because it uniquely reflects human nature, as its defenders often claim.”

¹⁴ Ps 14:3, Rom 3:10

comes real freedom for all individuals within. This is the line of thought: If everyone is required to pool a substantial amount or all of their income into a community pot, all will have the means to eat, live comfortably, and enjoy life at a reasonable standard. In this way, all individuals of the community are free from the fear of starvation or a place to live. They are all guaranteed an education, health care, student aid, or whatever else the community deems as essential to a full and dignified life. A big assumption made up to this point is that the production of the individuals will remain the same even though a large portion, if not all their income, is no longer their own to manage. If the humanistic view of individuals were true, it might be so. However, most individuals are not driven to work hard if they do not see a reward for their hard work.

Pure socialism depends on a non-existent goodness in man to motivate him to "give according to his ability" so that everyone can "have according to his need". It tempts the laziness and selfishness in man's nature to let someone else carry his burden for him.¹⁵

This has been the biggest flaw made apparent in the implementation of the socialist system. An underlying truth about humans is that we like to see rewards. Production inevitably suffers if personal gratification is partially or completely removed. Humans are in fact still sinful and therefore by nature always selfish. As capitalism has its faults, so too does socialism. The pride of this system also becomes its bane. A heightened sense of community does provide a general sense of security and well-being, but the overall production, creativity, and individuality tend to decrease.

In capitalism, the belief in God is more or less irrelevant to the system. In socialism, God tends to become the enemy. Marx and the other philosophers who developed socialism did not have a place for religion. "Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself."¹⁶ In fact, they viewed it as a tool used by the elite to keep commoners in line and therefore must be overcome. "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."¹⁷ In their mind, religious beliefs only caused divisions among the whole. Anything that caused serious ideological inconsistencies only hurt society's highest

¹⁵ John Brug, "The Christian's Dual Citizenship," Ohio Conference, Peace of Our Savior, New Carlisle, Ohio, May 1973; available from <http://www.wlssays.net/files/BrugCitizenship.rtf>; Internet; accessed December 1, 2013, 6.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Paris, 1844); available from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm#05>; Internet; accessed February 15, 2014.

¹⁷ Ibid.

priority: community that values each and every member as an equal. Not all modern socialist states would go this far in their beliefs. However, a strong case could be made that hints of this mentality inevitably creep into every version of socialism.

Every time socialism is evaluated, it must be clarified that the vision and the practical implementation of it often look very different. C. T. Kurien calls the real examples of socialism we have seen in the last century, “historical socialism.”¹⁸ It can be easy to conclude from what happened in Russia under the U.S.S.R that all brands of socialism are extremely detrimental and destructive to not only individuals but the entire community. In response, it should be pointed out that the communist system does stray far from its socialist beginnings. It should also be pointed out the U.S.S.R is a descriptive example of one instance of how socialism developed. It is not prescriptive of the ideology or vision of what socialism was meant to be. China, which also has implemented a form of communism, displays serious concerns but also critical improvements in the lives and opportunities of its people. Those, one could argue, are not even examples of socialism but a different animal entirely. For example, if one looks at Sweden or any one of the Scandinavian countries, one finds systems of socialism that look nothing like what existed in the U.S.S.R or exists in China today. In Sweden, for example, one finds a democratic government, a people free to keep 60% of their earnings, and yet a functioning social system that provides a safety net for all its citizens. There, it could be argued, one finds a socialist system that “works.” What all this means is that, just as assuming capitalism in the U.S. is how every other capitalist country functions, one cannot assume socialism does or will look the same in every country it is implemented.

Some things can be evaluated in general about historical socialism however. C. T. Kurien describes a universal positive he observes even in some of the uglier versions of “historical socialism:”

Even under such adverse conditions historical socialism dared to proclaim that the cardinal feature of the new economic order would be its inclusive nature (in sharp contrast to the exclusive propensities that capitalism was generating and strengthening in their lands), a commitment to make available the basic needs of life to every member of society, particularly the hitherto neglected and discriminated sections. In most instances, countries that went in for historical socialism succeeded in this basic objective, also ensuring that every citizen of the country concerned had food and clothing; that every child had the opportunity to receive education; that all citizens became literate; and that minimum provisions were made for the health care of everyone irrespective of the size of their purse. The level of achievement in these

¹⁸ Kurien, 314.

matters has varied from country to country, but it is impossible not to marvel at what the People's Republic of China has achieved in providing for these basic physical needs within a short period of four decades.¹⁹

Kurien also describes unfortunate consequences that have been observed in historical socialist systems:

The problems with historical socialism, however, were not only the arbitrariness that became apparent in the execution of decisions; they go much deeper. In each instance of historical socialism there has been a variety of specific problems that arose, became complex and led, finally, to the overthrow of what were, at one time, considered to be the bastions of stability.

Historical Socialism has shown a built-in leaning towards centralization... With the nationalization of enterprises, this rather inherent tendency toward centralization was matched by the bureaucratic need for administration and thus the centralized model appeared to be the right order in socialist systems.²⁰

For all its talk about creating true freedom for the individuals in this new community, historical socialism has always developed a strong central control to maintain the status quo. In order to keep a balance of resources and a unified vision, the system demands leadership. These examples are but a tiny sampling of all that could be said for and against this rather new system implemented in very different circumstances and understandings. No perfect system of economics exists. Socialism carries baggage like any other attempt to solve the problem of economics in a sinful world.

What should be drawn from this section is that socialism, like capitalism has both ideological and practical implications that are beneficial and detrimental. I wish to reiterate, the purpose of this paper is not to convince you that socialism is superior and truly the rightful successor to our system of economics. Rather, the purpose of this first section is to illustrate the underlying beliefs of each system and to demonstrate that there are weaknesses and contradictions in both. Every system, no matter how much planning, thought, or "evolution" it has gone through, remains an imperfect system. Why is it always that way?

A world that is nothing more than a huge machine is a world that can be "fixed" when it's not working properly... For if the world is a big machine, it can be adjusted like any other machine. But most of the world's problems are people problems--social problems. They are the result of humankind dealing with humankind. War is a people problem. Poverty is a people problem.²¹

¹⁹ Kurien, 315.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Edward R. Dayton. *What Ever Happened to Commitment?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 43-44.

No matter what system a country uses, it inevitably will remain flawed because the people it serves are flawed. Humans, as we know from Scripture, are imperfect, sinful beings:

All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. Ps 14:3 NIV¹¹

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Rom. 3:23 NIV²²

Save yourselves from this corrupt generation. Acts 2:40 NIV

They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good. Titus 1:16 NIV

Where there is sin, there will be disorder. Contrary to the beliefs of humanism, humanity will never achieve perfection here on earth. Contrary to the beliefs of individualism, we do not nor can we create or save ourselves.

Dealing with the Problem

Where does this leave us? What can and should Christians do when faced with the problem of economics in a sinful world? From the pages of Scripture, we are reminded again and again that this is not our home; “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own; as it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (Jn 15:19 NIV). “Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world’” (Jn 18:36 ESV). Jesus makes it very clear that we are not to expect his kingdom to be of this world. A perfect system will be awaiting us at the doors of heaven, but until then, we are to be in the world but not of it. How do we do that? Each system and every place presents its own opportunities and challenges. For American Christians, that system is capitalism. We grew up in it. We live inside it. We preach and teach surrounded by it. How has that affected us? What dangers lurk at every corner that we may not even be aware of? What opportunities have we overlooked? This is what we can and should do as Christians in the United States: take a good hard look at our context, our very own brand of capitalism, and see how we fit in. By fairly evaluating our unique situation, we can begin to understand how we as individuals and as a church are able to apply the principles of Scripture to our lives and ministries.

It is entirely appropriate to ask how our economic lives ought to be ordered in response to the life and call of the One who does save, Jesus Christ. It is entirely appropriate to ask if our lives are ordered economically in such a way that they nurture rather than corrupt desire, enhance rather than hinder faithful discipleship,

²² When I write NIV, without 84 or 11 after it, both versions have the same text.

and foster rather than obstruct communion.²³

The most important economic question for a Christian is "How can I do the most to serve God and my neighbor with the means which God has given me within the system and government under which he has placed me?"²⁴

I will argue in this paper that capitalism has affected Christianity in America, and even Christianity in the WELS, in negative ways. I will identify five ways capitalism has corrupted our view of ourselves and the church and what we can do to realign our views with Scripture.

II. A Closer Look at Capitalism and Scripture

As we take a closer look at the subtle ways in which capitalism twists the values and beliefs of American Christians, we will focus on five key concepts: individualism, materialism, consumerism, successism and post-modernism. How are we to view ourselves? What do we need in order to be happy? How do we measure our worth? What makes us successful? Who can we trust? How do these answers match up with what Scripture teaches us?

Individualism

Individualism is at the center of capitalist economics. There are two main attributes of the individual in capitalism: autonomy and self-creation. Autonomy means a man has the ability to rule himself without being subject to authority, coercion, or the will of others. "The capitalist individual is sovereign in the sense that she is not dependent on or subject to others except to the extent that she voluntarily enters into relations with a view to her own interests."²⁵ This does not just mean that we want to have our own private property. It includes everything we have and everything we believe in. No one has the right to my things. No one has the right to tell me what to believe. On the other side, I have no right to take your things or tell you what you must believe. The other attribute of the capitalist individual is that he is self-created. Each individual is charged with making himself. Just like Robinson Crusoe had to find a way to survive on an island all by himself, each person in capitalism is in charge of his own survival and success. "One might even say that in a sense we all become 'small business owners' and the small business that we are about is the production of our own self."

²³ Bell, 89.

²⁴ Brug, 7.

²⁵ Bell, 95.

²⁶ It is our job to keep our business looking good, making a little more every year, and hopefully expanding before long. We take what we can in order to improve our person, pension, and position. Capitalism's purpose then is to achieve one's own good.

How does individualism play out when there are many individuals interacting on a daily basis? "'Individualism' is not about isolation but about a particular way of relating to others... *It consists of* individuals who neither owe nor properly expect anything from others beyond that to which each individual voluntarily commits."²⁷ As soon as there is more than one person in close proximity there must be some type of community, but in capitalism, it is not a community founded on common values or social responsibility. This community consists merely of voluntary agreements made for mutual benefit.

The emphasis on self-interest entails a rejection of any substantive notion of a shared purpose or common good that unites humanity... At best, capitalism is compatible with only the thinnest notion of a general interest, understood as securing the conditions whereby individuals are free to pursue their disparate private goods.²⁸

Contracts are made to secure one's own well-being. For example, if I could be killed by anyone walking down the street, my success is at risk. Since both my neighbor and I have a similar potential problem, we make a mutually beneficial contract that we will not kill each other. A thin agreement has been made to protect our own well-being. This seems practical and just fine when both parties are on the same playing field. However, when one side needs more help or has nothing to bargain with, no agreement is made. Missing then is any way to regulate wealth so that those with nothing have a voice in the doing of things. Individuals who are of the same status can make agreements but those who are at a lesser status have no say in the matter. "Capitalism recognizes no obligation or responsibility to manage outcomes of voluntary exchanges or to redistribute goods and services under the guise of what is often called social or distributive justice."²⁹ The purpose of community then is subordinate to what the individual desires. "Individualism fosters a mentality in which everything becomes about us."³⁰ In making everything revolve around my self-interest, everyone else becomes an obstacle or a stepping stool to *my* success.

²⁶ Ibid., 96.

²⁷ Ibid., 97.

²⁸ Ibid., 101-102.

²⁹ Ibid., 110.

³⁰ Matthew Carroll. "A Biblical Approach to Hospitality," *Review & Expositor* 108, no. 4 (September 1, 2011): 521.

The capitalist community is a battlefield where individuals compete for scarce resources and limited opportunity. Dan Bell describes it this way: “Capitalism, we might say, is commercial war.”³¹ This perspective encourages removing care and emotions from our dealing with other human beings. Of course, they have needs, desires, and dreams just like me but it is not my responsibility to do anything for them that does not directly or indirectly help me. It actually makes me foolish to care about someone because it puts me at a disadvantage to my competitor. Others too easily become the opponent in this fend-for-yourself mentality. They quickly become no more than a commodity subject to the same cost/benefit logic one would use on any other consumer good.

Under capitalism people exist for one another in an instrumental fashion; capitalism encourages us to view others in terms of how they can serve our self-interested projects... The capitalist market is nothing less than a Darwinian calculus of human lives, with the highly productive regarded as more valuable than others, who are esteemed less and hence may be sacrificed or abandoned... In a world dominated by commodities, persons come to be valued by the same criteria as commodities—marketability, profitability, and consumability.³²

When people are viewed as commodities, the rules and responsibilities that may once have existed erode into a virtue-less mathematical formula for exponential growth. Examples of viewing people with a strictly individualistic mindset: The poor threaten to take what I have justly earned. Marriage becomes a social contract that only remains legitimate as long as it remains beneficial to me. Children are accessories and potentially detrimental to my financial future. Family responsibility is secondary to any personal responsibility I may have. My body is just raw material for manufacturing wealth and maximizing pleasure. The elderly will get my help and time when I can afford to share it. My time is only spent wisely if I can see the benefit to my own status.

Painted above is an ugly description of what individualism would look like if its ideals were allowed to run free. Thankfully, God has written his natural law on the hearts of all people. While it is an incomplete and often dulled sense of morality, every human still feels that certain things are right or wrong. This is why, even in a system that teaches its people to care for themselves, there is still a push for some justice when it is clear to all that something is not right.

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the

³¹ Bell, 104.

³² Bell, 105-106.

law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them. Romans 2:14-15 NIV11

It is that morality that keeps individualism from playing out the extremes which it teaches. However, what would anyone born during the '50s or earlier tell you about our country? The general Christian morality that our country agreed upon before has been slowly eroding and disappearing from our society. Without a strong standard upheld by the nation as a whole, the morality of the majority has grown even more dulled than before. Immorality results and more injustices are made apparent as individualism becomes even more unbridled in this generation than it was in the last.

As individuals living inside the context of capitalism and its driving force—individualism—Christians must also evaluate if they are adapting to what the world around them is defining as the purpose of our personal existence. How does God's Word paint a different picture of what our freedom and independence are to be used for? Does Scripture teach us this same view of ourselves, our purpose, and our life among other human beings? Is it God's will that we simply play by the rules set by this culture of individualism because otherwise we will be trampled by the masses of individuals who continue to serve themselves without any hindrance whatsoever?

First, let us understand that the underlying beliefs of individualism are nothing new. Ever since the fall into sin in the garden of Eden, men and women of every generation have instinctively sought their own good over and above the will of God and the needs of their neighbor. In addressing individualism, we not only address a recent sickness but a disease that began in the human race already in its first parents. Is not the temptation that the serpent presented to Eve the same temptation at the heart of individualism? "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gn 3:5 NIV). Satan was appealing to Eve to think of herself over and above what God had said. "Is it not more self-serving for you to eat of this tasty fruit and know more than you do now? Doesn't that sound better than simply obeying your God?" Satan tempted Eve with self-improvement. He urged her to think of herself first and God second. As she took hold of that apple and sunk her teeth into its flesh, with Adam mimicking her in like fashion, they both chose to seek their own good instead of the true good God had intended for them. Sinfulness is at its core selfishness. Luther wrote:

In all these works we see nothing else than self-love, which seeks its own, takes from God what is His, from men what is theirs, and gives neither God nor men anything of what it has, is, and can do. Therefore St. Augustine well says: “The beginning of all sin is the love of one’s own self.”³³

Man can seek only his own interests and love himself above all things. This is the essence of all his faults.³⁴

Since that time, humanity has served itself. No longer is man’s desire for God. In each human is a little individualist who believes he can create himself without any help from another. “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (Eph. 2:3 NIV). Selfishness reigns in the heart of every human being by nature.

We were created to desire God and the things of God, to delight in and enjoy God and to revel in God's glory; yet, in sin we no longer do so. We do not desire God and the things of God. Our desire is disordered. As the prophet Isaiah suggests (55:2), we desire things that do not satisfy. It would not be too strong to say that we are enslaved, held captive by, this disordered desire (see 1 Tim 6:9). That is why our hearts are restless.³⁵

If this is true of all people, why then is it included specifically under the umbrella of capitalism? Is not this a universal problem present in all systems? Yes. Where there are humans, there will be selfishness and individualism. However, there is reason to put added emphasis on it when addressing the dangers of capitalism because capitalism not only allows for it but teaches individualism as a virtue. “Capitalism makes a virtue of what the tradition denounces as one of the seven deadly sins: avarice or greed.”³⁶ Capitalism is often lauded because it is the most “realistic option” for this very reason: it does not fight the natural tendencies of man but embraces them. It builds this selfish desire of every person into its very foundation. The desire for every individual to create themselves and to improve their own situation is what fuels the effectiveness of the system. A healthy work ethic is one thing but a sinful desire for self is another thing entirely. The desire for self-improvement is what creates such productive wonders in a capitalist system. In this sinful world filled with selfish people, there is no greater driving force than one’s own desire for personal gain.

It (capitalism) corrupts desire so that it no longer flows according to its proper, created end; it twists desire and in so doing obstructs our friendship with God, one

³³ Edward M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, Vol. III. (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publ. House, 1959), 1270.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Bell, 86.

³⁶ Ibid., 168.

another, and creation. In other words, the problem with capitalism is not simply that it may not work but that even if it does increase aggregate wealth, it is still wrong and is to be opposed because of what it does to human desire and human sociality.³⁷

While the greatest strength of capitalism is its effectiveness to harness the productivity of its people, it does so by encouraging each and every one of us to let loose our selfish ambition.

The Bible places serving only ourselves among sins like murder, adultery and debauchery. It is a sin that makes the statement, “I do not need any help from any other. I am just fine on my own. My needs and desires come before that of any other.” Scripture is very clear in condemning any form of selfishness:

But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. Rom 2:8 NIV

For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. Phil 2:21 NIV11

For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. 2 Tim. 3:2-4 ESV

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. James 3:16 ESV

Christians are also guilty of seeking selfish ends just as much as the unbelievers down the street. Often our decisions, commitments, and priorities reflect selfish goals rather than praising God and serving our neighbors in whatever way possible. “When [American Christians] do make commitments, too often they are based on the performances of others, rather than on an unconditional commitment to the individual as a person.”³⁸

Jesus called us out of our selfish existence by being selfless for us. The Son of God emptied himself of his power and majesty so that he could save us sinners. The one who deserved every bit of service did not come to be served but to serve. He gave everything to set us free. No clearer is this demonstrated than on the cross where he willingly let his creation kill its creator. He sacrificed himself for our good. He died to pay for our selfishness. He lives to free us from it. His self-sacrificing love fills us with a different attitude. Knowing what he has done inspires us to serve him out of thanks. Jesus gave everything up for me. I

³⁷ Ibid., 88.

³⁸ Dayton, 62.

want to imitate his attitude. I want others to understand the true fulfillment Jesus gives through his love.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Phil 2:1-8 NIV11

We strive to follow Jesus with our lives out of thanks. Sadly, that does not always happen. Again we return to Jesus, and again Christ's selfless love covers over our failures.

In our battle against selfishness, we look to the Bible to remind us of our sin, to inspire us with Christ's love, and to direct our ways according to God's will. Without fail, Scripture urges selflessness and commends those who put their own needs and desires aside to serve God and others before themselves:

Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. 1 Cor. 10:24 ESV

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Heb 13:16 ESV

But if anyone has the material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 1 Jn 3:17 NIV11

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Acts 20:35 ESV

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me. Rom 15:1-3 NIV11

And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. 2 Cor 5:15 ESV

The list could go on and on of passages that speak about how Christ has called us to order all our doings as praise and thankfulness to God and as service to others. We do this, recognizing that people are not merely another commodity subject to an objective cost/benefit analysis.

They are individuals for whom Christ died and whom he wants to save.

People are not properly regarded as either merely means or obstacles to the attainment of self-interest; they are gifts from God and for each other and are valued as such, irrespective of efficiency calculations and their market "worth."³⁹

People are for desiring and delighting in God and reflecting God's glory. We are created for friendship, for communion, with God. The Trinity is a communion of love into which we are invited. Of course, this friendship is not merely a matter of me and God, of me and Jesus. After all, Scripture reminds us we cannot be friends of God if we hate our neighbors (1 John 3:17; 4:20-21) and that redemption involves breaking down the walls of hostility that divide peoples (Eph 2; Gal 3:28); hence, the commandments are succinctly summed up in the exhortation that we "love God and neighbor" (Matt 22:35-40).⁴⁰

Scripture is not ambiguous when it comes to directly opposing an existence that is merely caught up with pleasing and building up oneself. This willingness to give up our time, our love, and every other blessing demonstrates that Christ's love has filled us up completely with all that we need. His love transforms us from self-driven sinners to self-sacrificing children of our heavenly Father.

To thrive in our economic culture, it is almost impossible to avoid becoming self-centered and self-serving. The competitive nature of the free-market almost demands a certain ruthlessness in personal managing of our time, emotions, and finances. What comfort or encouragement does Scripture give to us as Christians who feel the pressure to adapt and conform to this requirement of capitalism?

Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses. Pr 28:27 NIV11

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. Phil 4:19 NIV11

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 than food, and the body more 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? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little

³⁹ Bell, 171.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 85.

faith? So do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matt 6:25-33 NIV11

While it may seem at times that we must be selfish to survive the ruthless environment of our competitive free market system, God assures us again and again in his Word that he will take care of his own. Just like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, he will take care of our needs and clothe us in splendor. He points us instead to the work of his kingdom. Seek this first and know that everything else will be taken care of as well.

God does urge us to balance our approach to others. He wants us to remain innocent like doves in being willing to help others in need and “reckless” in our willingness to be selfless. He also tells us to be shrewd like snakes when dealing with those who would maliciously try to hurt or take advantage of us (Matt. 10:16). Balancing these two principles and knowing when to be a dove or a snake can be difficult. Keeping our motives in check during the tough situations helps us navigate these muddy waters with a clear conscience and a sincere heart. Whether we give or refuse, let it be out of love that we do so, not out of pride, fear, doubt or greed.

When from little on we are taught that we must go out and create our own future and happiness, it seems a logical conclusion that when we do achieve earthly success, it is by our own doing.

We "rich" Americans have easily concluded that what we have has come from our own efforts. After all, each day we are called on to "make it on our own." We have been encouraged to become an active participant in our own culture because our culture assumes we can do something. We believe, as Seward said, "a rich man cannot be completely bad--or else he would not be rich."⁴¹

We pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Once we have the wealth that *we* earned, heeding the advice drilled into our heads by our experience, we keep it for ourselves. This is our right and privilege. Giving any of it away to the less fortunate only encourages others to shirk their own responsibility to create themselves. What perspective change does Scripture give to us when assessing the wealth and self-improvement we have achieved by our own sweat and tears?

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green

⁴¹ Dayton, 59.

plants, I give you everything. Gen 9:3 ESV

But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth. Deut 8:18 NIV

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised. Job 1:21 NIV

The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life. Job 33:4 NIV

Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. Ecc 5:19 NIV84

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights. James 1:17 NIV

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Eph 2:8-10 ESV

God is the one who has provided the food that we eat, from the grain in the field to the animals we hunt. He provides the water we drink and the hands with which we cup it. He gives us the ability to work and the success our toil creates. He gives us the very breath we take in and out every waking moment of our days. He gives us forgiveness for all our sins. He gives us faith to receive that forgiveness. Nothing we do could be accomplished without his gracious hand allowing us to thrive. As much as our world wants us to believe in ourselves and the power we possess to create ourselves, none of it would be possible if God did not give it. Individualism claims that we are autonomous, self-creating beings, but if one or both of these were true, we would cease to exist. All we do and have comes from God, the maker and preserver of this world and all those in it.

As one of the key pillars of capitalism, individualism runs counter to what Scripture describes as the way we are to view ourselves, our purpose, and the others with whom we share this country. This undercurrent of our economic system is a dangerous source of temptation to become self-centered, self-absorbed, and heartless to others who cannot seem to help themselves. Reminding ourselves of how helpless we are without God's help gives us a more open heart to help others in need. Looking at the example of our Savior provides us with a clear picture of how our lives should be ordered: We are to spend our lives serving and praising the God who gave us all that we need. We have been called to be part of something

bigger than ourselves. We are a part of his community, the body of Christ. This body cannot function in autonomy but thrives in the community of God's grace. Individualism offers no comfort when our true situation is made clear.

Materialism

What is materialism? Webster's dictionary defines it as "a way of thinking that gives too much importance to material possessions rather than to spiritual or intellectual things. A doctrine that the only or the highest values or objectives lie in material well-being and in the furtherance of material progress."⁴² More than anything, this dynamic of capitalism manifests itself in the way we order our day-to-day lives. When asked point blank what the most important thing in their life is, most people would not answer by listing their prized boat, TV, or cell phone. Most would probably name their family and friends or their memories and experiences. However, if instead of asking each individual what they prized the most, one documented how they ordered their time, it would probably seem to the outward perspective that having and accumulating material things is the most important thing in that individual's life. The desire for physical things, for wealth in money or in possessions, has also been a vice of humanity since the fall into sin. If there is any doubt about this, simply open the Bible and look at how often it speaks about wealth and possessions. Humans are obsessed with having things. For those in third-world countries, where it is a challenge to have food on the table every night, accumulating such things may seem utterly foolish. In the United States, where most citizens enjoy a much higher standard of living, we are much more tempted to spend our time in search of additional things to make our life even better. Why do we buy things? Why do we each have several pairs of shoes, a personal cell-phone, designer clothes, and a house much bigger than the family within? Sometimes it stems from a search for security. Other times it makes the possessor feel more comfortable. Life seems easier. Sometimes we have things just because we can. Playing on the insatiable desire of humans for more, capitalism encourages us to seek out satisfaction in new, bigger, or better things. "The problem that drives the entire economic enterprise is rooted in the unquenchable, infinite nature of human desire."⁴³

Is it always bad to have things we don't need? Is it a sin to be wealthy? No.

⁴² "Materialism," *Merriam-Webster.com*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/materialism>, Internet; accessed November 26, 2013.

⁴³ Bell. 102.

Throughout the Bible, there are countless examples of those God loved who had a super-abundance of things. Abraham for example was one of the wealthiest people alive in his day. He and his nephew had so many servants, cattle and other possessions that they needed to split up and settle down in different areas. Solomon was granted a wish from God for whatever he asked for. He asked for wisdom. God made him the wisest man to ever live and on top of that, he made him one of the wealthiest men to ever live. If wealth and possessions in and of themselves were evil, why would God give these men so many earthly blessings? God showers blessings on unbelievers and believers alike. He gives them to us for our enjoyment. He delights in providing for his people with more than they need. Where then is the danger of material possessions? The danger has always been in the person. Materialism is not just the holding of wealth, whether it be a lot or a little, but the attitude of the holder. If having a lot of goods becomes the focus of life, that focus is no longer on God as the giver of those things but on the things themselves. Materialism is properly defined as putting too much stress on wealth or the accumulating of that wealth. If this becomes the source of comfort, security, or purpose, these blessings from God become a curse and only serve to pull away from the true source of comfort, security, and purpose.

Scripture gives so many warnings against the treasures of this world becoming the reason for which we live or the source of our happiness:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matt 6:19-21 ESV

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Matt 6:24 NIV11

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. 1 Tim 6:9-10 ESV

The wealth of this world cannot provide true security and comfort. When the end of days comes, everything accumulated here on this earth will pass away. None of the treasures we store up from our hard work here will follow us into the next life. When Jesus returns to judge the world, he will look for those who stored up treasures in heaven. What are these treasures in heaven? They are a willing and faithful spirit that clings to Jesus throughout life

as the sole source of truth, comfort, and security. They are fruits of faith that show themselves in how we order our day-to-day lives. If our hard work and faithfulness was done, not out of a desire to purchase just one more thing to make us happy, but out of thankfulness to Christ for having saved us, that is a true fruit of faith. It is a reflection of our trust that Jesus fills our deepest needs. The things of this world are enjoyable, but they are ultimately disposable. This is the attitude Scripture urges us to take toward our great or meager wealth and possessions here and now.

Capitalism urges us to think differently. Since part of the economic circle is not that we sit on the money that we make but that we spend it back into the market, companies are constantly trying to convince us that their product is something that we need and will finally grant us the happiness that we have been longing for. This process of getting us to buy products overlaps into the next main dogma of capitalism: consumerism.

Consumerism

Consumerism is the more recent phase of materialism gone crazy. It is an active attempt to sell everything by any means necessary to a specific target group. One could describe it as the process of tailoring a product to consumers in such a way that they believe it to be an essential part to their happiness. In part because of the super-abundance of the basic essentials of everyday living, a large portion of the market in the United States has shifted to consumer goods. Consumer goods are products that are not essential for staying alive but products made for a “better” living experience. For example, this would include TVs, cell-phones, fancy restaurants, health supplements, work-out machines... etc. Everything that does not fall under the bare essentials of living could be categorized under the broad category of consumer goods. Since we don’t need these things, the job of the company or the ad agency they employ is to convince us that we want these things so much that we just have to have them. We need them.

After spending time in Sweden (where ads are not nearly as common) for six months during my college years, I remember feeling overwhelmed by the number of ads I saw and heard all around me when I returned to the States. A research firm called Yankelovich estimated that a person living in an American city 30 years ago saw up to 2,000 ad messages per day. Today, they estimated that this number is probably closer to 5,000.⁴⁴ Everywhere we

⁴⁴Louise Story, “Anywhere the Eye Can See, It is Likely to See an Ad,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2007 [online]; available from

look or listen, we are constantly bombarded with ad campaigns for anything from soap to sushi. Where there used to be blank spaces, there is a name or slogan that at least causes you to think about the product being advertised. Sometimes an ad will attempt to convince you through a well-phrased argument. Another method that is used is more like a subliminal message. Ziad El-Hady from the Huffington Post comments:

A common psychological principle used by advertisers is that repetition constitutes mental conditioning. Studies show that the more something is repeated to you, the more you will believe it. So whether it's "I'm lovin' it", "Have a break, have a `Kit-Kat", or "Washing machines live longer with Calgon", the mere repetition of these messages is able to motivate potential buyers and construct certain ideas in their minds with added cognitive and emotional associations.⁴⁵

Without most consumers realizing it, companies have conditioned buyers to think of products they may not even be interested in. Anyone who has lived in the U.S. for an extended period of time could tell you that ads are everywhere. At risk of being suffocating, businesses are fighting to convince consumers at every turn to want their product.

Besides minimal restrictions by our government to hinder what can and can't be shown or broadcast in public, ad agencies will use whatever device they can to manipulate an individual's attention. Oftentimes these images or themes use sinful desires to draw in their cliental:

As well as showing us products, adverts [slang, short for advertisements] also present us with values, ideals and social standards. They draw upon major personal themes such as beauty, happiness, love, companionship, sex, and self-image, in a positive but unrealistic light to promote their product. As a consequence, these adverts are potentially shaping us towards mental states, which are in fact, quite inhibiting, insecure, and unhealthy.⁴⁶

Not only do many of these advertisements encourage extreme materialism, but they often encourage us to indulge other sinful desires in safely wrapped packages. The long term effects of expanded exposure to many of these themes have already been well documented and acknowledged by concerned psychologists. Sexualization⁴⁷ and body dissatisfaction are

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/15/business/media/15everywhere.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0;
Internet; accessed December 2, 2013.

⁴⁵ Ziad El-Hady, "The Dogma of Advertising and Capitalism," January 24, 2013 [on-line]; available from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ziad-elhady/the-dogma-of-advertising-_b_2540390.html;

Internet; accessed December 2, 2013.

⁴⁶ El-Hady.

⁴⁷The American Psychological Association defines 'sexualization' as: "when a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics."

examples of the long-term effects surfacing as a result of an overexposure to images with the consistent connection between women, sex, desire, beauty, thinness, and happiness. These images are so commonly used that we hardly even notice it.⁴⁸

Another side-effect of consumerism is a shift of the focus back to the individual, his needs and his desires. Since companies are constantly attempting to appeal to what the people want now, it leaves the consumer feeling like the one in control. Whoever or whatever is being sold should be tailored to my wants and desires. This applies to fitness classes, education, and even religion. In the next section, we will explore specifics on how the consumer's view of religion has shifted in that it also must adapt to best fit the wants and desires of the individual rather than the other way around.

Does Scripture give specifics against the dangers of consumerism? The same passages that speak against our treasure becoming something from this world also apply to this add-on to materialism. Since we are pressed on every side to find our happiness and satisfaction in products, self-help classes, books, movies, food, etc., it becomes even harder to avoid falling prey to their false promises. Because of this, it is all the more important to spend time immersed in God's Word and the real promises found within:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. Ps 1:1-3 NIV11

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Psalm 119:11 ESV

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. Col 3:16 NIV11

He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. Titus 1:9 NIV

Each of these passages speaks about the power of God's Word to teach us what is right and admirable to do. As the temptations become all the more prevalent around us, God tells us to find true meaning and understanding from his wisdom. These difficulties and temptations are nothing new nor are they unexpected. Just as was given in the days of the Israelites and in the days of Jesus and the apostles, this is the advice given to us: immerse yourself in God by

⁴⁸ El-Hady.

reading and studying his Word. There we find true satisfaction from the unending mercy of God. There we are reminded of what is good and profitable for us to do. There we see the foreknowledge of God about the very difficulties we would face today. There we find true peace, security, and happiness.

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth...But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Tim 3:1-7, 14-17 NIV11

In this constantly changing and evolving scene of products and solutions for today's problems, we find the steady and unchanging Solution to everything in Jesus Christ and his gospel. Let us rejoice that this message does not change or conform to the innovative strategies of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh.

Successism

Striving for success in all we do is not a bad thing. Jesus tells a parable about a master entrusting his wealth to his servants while he is gone. When he returns, he asks for the servants to give an accounting of what they did with his money. The master commends the servants who were successful in using what they were entrusted with to make more. He shuns the servant who did nothing with what he had. The master threw him out, took what he did have and gave it to the one who had earned the most. Does not this teach us that being successful with what we are given is a God-given goal for our lives? Yes, God wants us to be truly successful. No, God does not want us to strive after what capitalism defines as success. No, God did not intend for us to put our hope and dreams into success itself. Successism is a dangerous and misleading complement to individualism, materialism, and consumerism that again shifts our focus from God and his blessings, to us and our ability. The term "successism" is used to mean an almost unhealthy obsession with the idea of success, where success is usually equivalent to doing very well financially or in one's career. Do those things

make someone truly successful? It may be true that getting a better job or being in a better place financially can give some respite to some pretty serious concerns. If the job previously held was making it hard to keep up on bill payments and living expenses, it truly is a success to get a better paying and more enjoyable job (for you as an individual and for any others depending on you). Being financially stable is always a good thing to strive towards as well. The problem arises when getting to a better financial status or a secure job defines whether one is *truly* successful or not.

The principle of contentment in the Bible is completely foreign to a capitalist mindset. In capitalism, more is always better, and therefore success by definition is a status of growth. Is there ever an end goal to success in capitalism? No. Not really. Capitalism teaches us to never be content with our status, but that greater happiness lies in achieving ever greater success. This mentality encourages people to become workaholics who continually funnel time and resources into this pursuit for more. Does having more things, more wealth, or more prestige really bring about a better life? Even those who have no Christian background recognize that this pursuit for happiness in success leaves most in even greater despair and loneliness.

People who use material goods as a measure of success – or who use shopping to try to relieve unhappiness in some other area of life – get trapped in what's been called the "loneliness loop". They shop in part to relieve feelings of loneliness – yet the result is that it makes their loneliness worse.⁴⁹

A search for happiness in a bottomless pit will be unending and unsatisfying. There is no promise from capitalism that we will ever reach the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. There is a dangling piece of candy held before our eyes but no guarantee that we will ever get it or that it is actually a delicious and worth-while piece of candy to run after.

It may well be that *having* more money would make some or even most of us happier. Undoubtedly, there are millions of people on the planet who'd be happier if they had more money. But at the same time, most of us might well be happier if we could learn to *value* money – and, specifically, the material stuff it can buy – a little less.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Oliver Burkeman, "Shoppers beware: A materialist ethos is more misery-inducing than we thought: Seeking happiness through material acquisition is associated with loneliness and worse responses to traumatic events," *The Guardian*; Oliver Burkeman's Blog, December 2, 2013 [on-line]; available from <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2013/dec/02/shoppers-beware-materialism-worse-than-thought>; Internet; accessed December 2, 2013.

⁵⁰ Burkeman.

Having a few more things may make life seem easier and more successful. The candy might even taste good. But it will not provide a lasting and sustaining “fix” to life’s challenges. Searching for meaning and purpose in the pursuit of worldly success will not end in happiness. Scripture points us to an entirely different perspective of our value, worth, and success. This thought that Oliver Burkeman alludes to in his article above is clearly laid out for us in God’s Word:

Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. Ecc. 4:6 NIV

The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether they eat little or much, but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep. Ecc. 5:12 NIV11

Everyone’s toil is for their mouth, yet their appetite is never satisfied. What advantage have the wise over fools? What do the poor gain by knowing how to conduct themselves before others? Better what the eye sees than the roving of the appetite. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecc 6:7-9 NIV11

Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. Luke 12:15 NIV11

Solomon was the wisest man to ever live and also one of the wealthiest. After a long life of building and expanding the kingdom of Israel, he reflects on all the worldly success he has achieved. All of it is meaningless and a chasing after the wind. No matter how much he did, it did not bring true satisfaction. He warns against this constant reaching for more and the stress of maintaining and protecting this fleeting crutch. This wealthy king concludes that it is better to have less and be content. The poor had something to teach him.

The apostle Paul suffered more during his years of ministry than most do in a lifetime. Yet, despite the stoning, beating, mocking, prison time, and starvation, he considered himself truly successful. Even though he didn’t enjoy success in a worldly sense, he found contentment in the only place it can be found:

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² 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 all this through him who gives me strength. Phil 4:11-13 NIV11

Being content can only come from one who is just as inexhaustible as our desire. Our God’s love knows no bounds. He alone can fill the emptiness that exists in all human beings when God is divorced from them. Humans were meant to have a relationship with their God. That

is how we were designed. Our sinful state leaves us with an gaping sense of longing. Only in God do we find something big enough to fill that hole.

Humanity may be called homo adorans -- worshiping beings. We are not beings caught in an endless cycle of trucking and bartering (homo economicus) but being inclined to worship and enjoy the divine love that provides all that we need. In other words, because the Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want (Ps. 23:1). We need not strive endlessly but can be content.⁵¹

Paul knew that whatever was done to him or taken from him, his soul was complete and secure because his relationship with God had been restored in Christ. We too find contentment in knowing God from his Word and being renewed by his Holy Spirit. Regardless of our status, wealth, or prestige now or in the future, we are truly successful in him who gives us all:

Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. Prov 15:16 ESV

When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty. Jeremiah 15:16 NIV

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Rom 14:17 NIV

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? James 2:5 NIV11

Knowing where true success comes from changes what we strive for. We thirst for righteousness. We hunger for the Lord's work. We willingly submit our time, possessions, and even our life to the one who gives us peace that transcends all understanding.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Matt 5:6 ESV

However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace. Acts 20:24 NIV11

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Phil 4:4-7 NIV11

Keep your lives free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he

⁵¹ Bell, 168.

has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you. Heb 13:5 NIV

Successism can lead us down an unending road of discontent and meaningless searching. The only solution for this is the infinite grace of God. In Christ, we overflow with joy because our every need and desire is fulfilled. This frees us to do things for our God and for others. We need nothing more. Jesus plus nothing equals everything.

Post-Modernism

This final concept I wish to explore is more a reaction to modernity and, I would argue, capitalism with its lack of sincerity, depth, and truthfulness. Individualism tells you that you can create yourself and there find true happiness and freedom. This is a false and empty promise. Materialism and consumerism promise things that will make your life better, happier, and more satisfying. This too is an empty promise. Successism drives you to work your hardest and achieve goals that will finally get you to a comfortable place. However, these goals cannot bring the comfort promised. Out of all these broken promises and misleading goals, one begins to distrust the world and all those who offer a new and improved answer to life’s most challenging questions. Post-modernism is a rejection of answers. It is a distrust of anything “sold” as truth. It is a practical reaction to answers that really provide no true benefit whatsoever. Post-modernism is where we find many within and without our churches. They are sick of being lied to, sold, tricked, and manipulated. Nothing is true. Everything is permitted. That is all that remains. No one can really know the truth about anything because there is no absolute truth.

Capitalism has recognized this too and in response has only increased its efforts to sell and package things in more “genuine” and “real” terms. Because of its adaptability, capitalism incorporates terms that are used to communicate real depth and plaster them on products that remain just as unsatisfying. The words “caring, genuine, authentic, real, faithful, true” and others with the same connotation of depth have been used and abused so much that they hardly convey a message any different than words like “cheap, foolish, scam, tricky, or fake.” This is a sad development that affects any attempt to teach about something that truly does embody the meanings of those words.

The secular world is not the only culprit for causing this numbness and distrust. Religious organizations, including many Christian groups, have sold cheap and unsatisfying solutions to life’s problems, making false promises of success or self-improvement based on

following a few rules or principles. These may attract many at first but when the effects wear off, the people disperse, more skeptical than before. Promising what the people want to hear can bring in the masses quickly but it cannot keep or satisfy them for long. In reaction to cheap grace or man-made answers to questions about life and death, many are left with a default skepticism towards anyone who claims to possess the truth.

Postmoderns, however, know their minds or experiences can be manipulated. Modernist boomers are suspicious of tradition in the true Enlightenment sense. They are the ultimate feeling generation, self-indulgent, and focused on their own “felt needs.” Postmodernity, however... sees marketing and advertising as capitalist intrusions with an agenda into forming people certain ways so as to benefit certain economic power interests. They respect truth that is lived. The postmodern generation may enjoy the show for a short while. But they are looking for a home, a community wherein a belonging can take root and the moral fabric of truth can be borne out... The next generation seeks community over anonymity and is overdosed on consumer appeals to felt needs. Postmoderns desire something bigger to be transformed into.⁵²

How do Christians share the absolute truths of Scripture and convey the real satisfaction that comes from knowing a God who does not lie, sell, cheat, or manipulate? In a nation filled with postmodern thinkers who have been conditioned to avoid thousands of advertisements a day, how do we demonstrate that in this sea of falsehood there is still one place where true living water flows? This is the heart of the problem we face in our American capitalist context: how do we order our lives and our church differently so that the depth of true Christianity is clearly proclaimed? How do we avoid becoming just another worldly institution that helps individuals find themselves instead of finding God? The final section of this paper will wrestle with practical ways the church can avoid the pitfalls of capitalism and reclaim its true function as the living, breathing body of Christ. Through our faith being lived in a genuine way, the gospel can shine its truth to even this skeptical generation.

III. Christianity in a Capitalist Context

In the former section, the main concepts taught by capitalism were compared to the principles laid out in God’s Word so that we could see clearly the dangers present all around us in our day-to-day existence in the United States. The constant pull of individualism, materialism, consumerism, and successism have had serious consequences on how Christians

⁵² David E. Fitch. *The Great Giveaway: reclaiming the mission of the church from big business organizations, psychotherapy, consumer capitalism, and other modern maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 55.

live their lives on a daily basis. When the principles of Scripture are fairly presented, it becomes clear that Christians are far from the ideal that God pictures for his children in a dying world. All too often we do not resemble a light on a hill that shines into the darkness but a faint flicker here and there from an alley or shack somewhere deep within the kingdom of this world. What can we do to separate ourselves from this sinful generation and better shine as the lights God has called us to be? What norms of our culture should we throw off that have no place in our life as the holy priesthood of all believers? How do we minister to a postmodern generation that has developed a strong skepticism of religion and authority? Wrestling with these questions will help us better understand what we as Christians can do to remove some of the shackles capitalism has placed on our shoulders. Wrestling with these questions will help us clear away the junk and cobwebs that have covered and cluttered the visible church so that its true appeal can shine brighter.

What follows in this section is an analysis of false teachings and ideas that have crept into the church in part because of the capitalist context we live in. We will attempt to filter through the false conceptions and rediscover what a real thriving church looks like. Finally we will explore some practical ways to refocus our methods and goals on what Scripture exemplifies for us to do. The purpose of all of this is to restore Scripture as the foundation of everything we do instead of letting capitalism be the base and Scripture but a face.

FAKE CHURCH

Church Shopping

One of the most common side-effects we experience from capitalism upon the realm of religion is its treatment of faith as just another consumer good for our self-improvement. When we buy consumer goods, we do so because we believe it will somehow improve our life. When we buy dietary supplements, we believe that they will help keep us healthy and strong. We purchase workout videos and gym memberships to keep our body in shape. Perusing the book store, we pick up books that promise to help us manage our finances and lifestyle for sustained growth. As individuals striving to constantly improve our situation, we find supplements for every aspect of life to improve our overall image. It makes sense to think of religion in the same way. We have taken care of our physical side, now we need to find a product that will best satisfy our spiritual side. As conditioned consumers, always looking for the best and most beneficial deal, we look for a church that best suits the needs we feel could be met by religion. This leads to the all too familiar term, “church shopping.”

We are conditioned to approach religion as a commodity, as just another consumer good alongside toothpaste and vacation homes. Think, for instance, of the commonplace practice of "church shopping." This is to say, capitalism encourages a shallow, decontextualized engagement with religious beliefs.⁵³

Approaching church in the same way we do any other grocery item we select from the supermarket causes us to see it as just another product among many options. The decision of what option is best comes from our personal beliefs and perceived needs. The problem here is that we often do not know what we truly need. Without the Word making us aware of our desperate need for a savior, we will pick a church for the wrong reasons.

The decision of which church to join is more likely to be based on what the individual and the family can receive from the church than on what the family can give to the church as each family member exercises his or her spiritual gifts.⁵⁴

Which one best provides childcare for my kids? Which one has the most programs for me to improve my finances, fitness, health, and wellness? Which option provides me with the free ticket out of hell but little commitment? Attending a church to simply supplement my life as is has serious consequences. It misses completely the true meaning of Christianity.

Rather than seeing our Christian life as fundamental to every other part of life, too often we see it as just another role we play. Instead of being slaves of Christ we demand the rights of our citizenship in the Kingdom. Instead of seeing all of life as part of kingdom life, our citizenship is a part-time affair.⁵⁵

Church is not just another product to make our earthly life better; it is a place where we learn how our life as is really is no life at all. Christianity is not about making the American lifestyle complete. It is all about abandoning our former way of life and finding true life in the Savior who paid dearly to make his life ours. Vital to understanding what Christianity is all about hinges on the fact that we not see it as another supplement but the core of our existence. Christianity does not fit in with an array of other things that "fix" our life, but it is the one thing needful that every other aspect of our life falls under.

What does this have to do with us who know full well that church is for more than complementing our earthly lifestyle? It is extremely important for us to not only be conscious of the current phenomenon of church shopping, but also to evaluate our own attitude towards church. Yes, we believe that Jesus has called us out of the world to be part of his other-

⁵³ Bell, 21.

⁵⁴ Dayton, 62.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 70.

worldly kingdom. Yes, we hear every Sunday in our WELS church that Christ died for our sins. But what do we often do then? We leave after the service, content with the spiritual compartment of our life filled for another week and continue with our day-to-day life as if nothing has changed. It is a real danger to us as well that we compartmentalize our faith as one small aspect of who we are instead of it being the very substance of every part of who we have become.

How do we know if we are compartmentalizing our faith? Think about all the different areas of life that you interact with on a weekly basis. When I am planning my budget, do I think about the fact that I can be more willing to give because God has promised to provide for all my needs? When I see that bigger and better TV at Walmart, do I only think about my budget or do I also factor in God's reminder to be content with what I have? Am I being selfish? As I plan the week and what I have time for, do I even consider my time as a gift from God? How does that affect my decision to skip midweek Bible study? When work is getting stressful and I head to the bar afterwards for relief, did I take the time to pray for God's help to deal with my current worries and concerns? My family life is suffering because I am always in the office or too tired when I come home, do I simply accept it as a necessary evil to provide for my family, or do I sit down and read Scripture with my family and reevaluate how I can prioritize my time to best balance my different vocations? These are just some examples of questions that we can all ask ourselves to see if God is a part of our entire lives. Christianity is not just for Sundays and satisfying the guilt of sin so that I can go out and keep living my life as if God were not now a part of it. This isn't a constraint but a full and wonderful reality of what the true faith is all about. It liberates us from our old way of life and invites us into a new way of seeing and dealing with every aspect of our coming and going.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; The old has gone, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV84

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4:22-24 NIV11

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Colossians 3:9-10 NIV11

Our culture tells us never to be satisfied with what we have, but to always reach for

more. We are liberated from this constant reaching by clinging to the pearl of great price that we already hold in our hand. Understanding that our worth is found in Christ, we no longer have to prove to others that we deserve a better status in their eyes. Knowing that our true wealth consists of the treasure we have in heaven, we are free to give up more of our earthly wealth to others so that they too may cling to the lasting treasure of Christ. Our Christian faith is so much more than a “fix” to keep us floating along as we did before. It fills us up with joy and peace that is not affected by the ups and downs of the stock market or our emotions. It is a rock to which we can turn in any and every circumstance, in good times and in bad. Here are some questions to ponder as we work through how this understanding looks in our church: What does it mean for me that Jesus is not just another part of who I am but the very foundation of everything I do and say? How do I show how much I value and trust him every day? How do I show others that my faith is not just head knowledge but also something that gives me peace even when my life seems to be falling apart? How do I display in my life and in my church that Christianity is more than just another commodity?

Social Gospel

Most of the books produced by evangelicals relating to economics revolve around how Christians have a duty to fix the problems of capitalism. This is called the social gospel. It goes like this: Since we (Christians) recognize the injustices that plague our system, and we have God’s command to oppose such injustices, then it must be our duty to spend our lives fighting for a better country. Ronald Sider, who is an advocate for political involvement for Christians, comes to this conclusion:

In fact, precisely our commitment to a biblically grounded understanding of human rights will lead us to challenge and correct the glaring weaknesses and injustices in the way today's existing democracies and market economies function even as we affirm their basic structure.⁵⁶

While he has a point, that the Bible does advocate a Christian’s responsibility to serve his or her neighbor in whatever way possible, Sider assumes certain rights for all people that the Bible in no way guarantees. He would claim that every person *deserves* the rights our democratic system has won for its citizens just by the fact that all humans are created in the image of God. The problem with this view is that it ignores the fall into sin and the loss of that image. Humans do not deserve certain things merely based on what we were intended to be in the Garden of Eden. After the fall, we lost any right or ability to claim anything for

⁵⁶ Sider, 144.

ourselves. We cannot advocate political involvement in an attempt to get back what we had in the garden. The image was lost and creation has been cursed. This earth will never be Eden again. God does not call us to fix this place but to rescue others from it. We do that with the gospel, not by any kind of force. This is what God meant when he told us to love our neighbor and when he told us to be lights in the darkness.

Our God does tell us to serve the needs of the poor and to be a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. This is why we do encourage one another to vote and oppose policies that contradict Scripture. However, we do not do this out of an individualistic mindset that everyone deserves a life to the fullest. The focus of God's Word is not the redemption of this present world, but God's redemption of sinners. Our purpose as Christians is not to "Christianize" the world through political reform but to preach the good news about Jesus and the liberation we have in him. The biggest danger of this social gospel is that it completely misses the main point of Christianity. We need to be rescued from our own sinful bodies that deserve nothing from our world or from God. That is what the Bible is all about: turning to God for forgiveness and new life. The main focus of true Christianity is not the reform of this world, but the proclamation of a Savior who rescues us from this evil place. This is the duty of every Christian: repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. Proclaim him to the nations. How best can we do that? It may be the opposite of asking for our rights:

We belong completely to the Lord, and the question that governs our actions is "How can we best serve him?" If we can show our faith in God best by enduring the unjust loss of our property or by suffering unjust servitude and thus showing that we are not attached to the things of the world, we should do that. If we can serve God best by forcing the ungodly to stop interfering with our time and possessions so that we can use them to serve the Lord, we should do that. If we can serve best by suffering persecution, we should do it gladly. If we believe God's kingdom will be served best by forcing the ungodly to stop interfering with the preaching of the Gospel, that's what we should do.⁵⁷

Success Theology

Another falsehood that has become prevalent in the church and fits perfectly with a capitalist mindset is called success theology. This idea seems to be especially prevalent in the United States and comes no doubt from our long lasting success as a nation. Many have falsely concluded that this nation was more successful because it is (was) a Christian nation. They believe that since we held God as our banner, he blessed our nation with more blessings than other nations. While at times in the Bible God did bless those who feared him, he never

⁵⁷ Brug, 4.

states that those who cling to him will have a better earthly life. He does teach the opposite. When Jesus was preparing his disciples for his departure, he told them that the world would hate them because of him. They would cause divisions. They would be flogged and beaten. All of this came true as they went out into the world to preach the good news. Having a stronger faith or more mission work under their belts did not bring them success in the eyes of the world. They suffered because of the gospel. Despite this clear teaching about the cross that each Christian bears as a follower of Christ, many have adopted this teaching of success theology.

Success theology is all about getting rewarded with earthly blessings for faithfulness to God. Churches that teach this version of the faith have attracted huge crowds. This is a perfect example of teaching what the people's itching ears want to hear: "For the time will come when people 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" (2 Tim. 4:3 NIV11). It is very appealing to the capitalist way of seeing things. "When I work hard and do what God has intended for me to do, he will bless me with success." While God does promise to bless those who trust in him, he does not say that he will give them what the world describes as success. "The opposite of scarcity is not 'unlimited' in the sense that God will satisfy our avarice, gluttony, and lust--all the cravings of our disordered or fallen desire. Rather, the abundance that God gives is a matter of enough."⁵⁸ This principle of God giving everything we need does not mean he gives all we need to be "successful" in an American sense of the word. It means that we have enough to run the race marked out for us. It means we are connected to an unlimited source of grace which brings us to heaven. "God's abundant provision should not be confused with a 'prosperity gospel.'"⁵⁹ Without the Word, we often paint what we want to be necessity. With the Word, God teaches us to understand that what we need and what we want are two very different things. Our faith helps us see how rich we are. We understand how much God has given. He promises to pour out righteousness on those who fear him. That may come in the form of suffering because through it we learn to trust in him all the more and there find true peace and security.

In this time between the times, God's abundance may take the form of martyrdom and resurrection, and the assurance that in giving our life, we actually receive life,

⁵⁸ Bell, 179.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 180.

and that although we may die, we will not perish (Matt. 22:39; Luke 9:24).⁶⁰ God does not teach success theology. Having worldly success as a goal of being Christian is a strictly capitalist way of twisting the words of God to mean nothing more than another consumer good for prosperity. The wealth found in true Christianity is so much more valuable than anything this world can offer. Short-changing the message of the gospel to draw people in for the wrong reasons will only lead them farther away from God and from salvation. This type of teaching causes many to distrust churches when they do not see the promised wealth in their own lives.

While this teaching is not taught in the WELS, the undercurrent of this thinking is well and alive in our churches. Many assume that worldly success will come to those who belong and attend church regularly. This assumption surfaces when something goes wrong. Some may feel that God has abandoned them or cheated them. They have followed his command to worship him regularly and give generously. “Why is God allowing these problems to happen in my life? Shouldn’t he be blessing me with better health, wealth, or something tangible?” This resembles the attitude of the older brother in the parable of the lost son told by Jesus. The older son was upset because he didn’t get a celebration like his younger brother did. While his younger brother had been off squandering the wealth of their father, the older son had remained home working hard for their father. He felt like he deserved a celebration from his father because he had been faithful and at home the entire time. What was the older son forgetting? He didn’t deserve anything from his father, yet he had been privileged with a wonderful life serving in his father’s field. We too have the privilege of receiving the means of grace from our God every time we attend church. In his mercy, God assures us of his love which he poured out for us through the blood of his Son on the cross. We hear of this in the Word proclaimed to us. We eat and drink the real body and blood of our Savior at his table. We do not give God anything in our service to him. It is a privilege to receive such wondrous gifts from him and to be a part of his ministry in the world. We have been richly blessed by God through it all! When we go through suffering and trials, God is still with us and blesses us, while it may be in ways we do not yet understand. He does not always promise to bless us in the way we think we should be blessed, but he does always bless us in the way we need most. That is God’s promise.

As a church, we sometimes let this success theology creep into our evaluation of

⁶⁰ Bell, 181.

whether our churches are doing things the right way or not. We look for visible success in our churches—for example, generous gifts or the amount of people in the pews—as signs that God is behind us. If our church is shrinking, then it must mean that God is not with that church. On the other hand, if the church is growing, then God must truly be satisfied with the faithfulness he finds in its members. This too is a version of the same falsehood, that we can expect capitalist success in response to faithfulness and doing things right.

Visible achievement is the primary motivation for the typical middle-class American, and Americans believe that anyone who has the will can "make it." Further, we have concluded that worldly wealth is a sign of God's blessing. Whereas many other peoples of the world believe that the accumulation of possessions and wealth can only be had at the expense of others, Americans believe there is enough wealth for everyone.⁶¹

We go against the grain of our culture when we do not base our decisions or our teachings on the visible achievements that follow. Often times the churches that teach the truth will suffer in an earthly sense while the churches that teach what the people want to hear will boom and grow.

The attitude of this Christian-capitalist idea—that results and earthly success are blessings from God in response to our faithfulness and diligence—can permeate how we see Christians around the world who are struggling for numbers, finances, and other signs of capitalist success:

They (Americans) assume since "we did it, they can do it too." This produces some negative side effects in American relationships with peoples of other countries. For example, Americans may be very generous in their desire to help people who are starving, but at the same time, consciously or subconsciously they may blame these people for having gotten themselves into the situation in the first place. Therefore a great deal of our generosity is done with an attitude of a superior giving to an inferior.⁶²

As this quote points out, we may consciously or subconsciously look down on Christians in other contexts who are struggling much more with sustaining a capitalist view of success. It may be by judging their slow growth in term of numbers. It may be by judging their faithfulness because of their poor giving. I fear that this is an all too prevalent attitude in our church body as well for judging if a mission is worthwhile or not. Are we making decisions of how and where to do missions based solely on the physical results that we see? Especially

⁶¹ Dayton, 57.

⁶² Ibid., 58.

in recent times, because of budget cuts to our mission funds, our Synod has had to make decisions about what missions to close and which to keep open. When making those hard decisions, how can we guard against simply deciding these things from a capitalist view of success? This is a difficult question to answer but it must be in the forefront of the minds of those who are making those decisions. We also need to be careful not to see the success of one church as a sign of those members being more faithful to their God. Those in a struggling congregation may be the most faithful members any of us have ever known, yet for a reason unknown, God has not given the same level of worldly success to them. God often sends hardship to believers to test them and strengthen them.⁶³

Does worldly or capitalist success reflect true success as God describes it? No. It may be that even a WELS church which has grown immensely and is well supported financially has had little to no true spiritual success. There may be more people and money, but their hearts may still remain far from their Lord and Savior. This brings us back to what the true Church is all about. It has nothing to do with worldly or capitalist success. It has everything to do with true spiritual success: that hearts recognize their sinfulness and embrace the mercy God has given them in Christ Jesus. This is what the church on earth is for. This is how we measure if a church is truly successful or not.

REAL CHURCH

The false teachings above bring out numerous ways that the Word of God can be misused and the mission of the church manipulated. The purpose of the church is not simply to have more satisfied customers. The purpose of the church is saving souls. In this final section, I will explore some practical thoughts, I believe, that may help us refocus our methods and goals to fulfill the church's true purpose. The areas of ministry that we will explore are worship, leadership, community, and evangelism.

Worship

In his book, *The Great Giveaway*, David Fitch warns against shifting the method of keeping people in worship from the power of the Word to things that make people feel good. He points out how seeker services—services designed to draw people in—can be dangerous if they are tailored to meet the “felt needs” of the people instead of the real needs they may not know they have. “Seeker services often present salvation as self-fulfillment, as the

⁶³ Heb 12, 1 Pe 1:6-7

answer to ‘felt needs.’ They present the gospel as attractive, professional, and successful.”⁶⁴ This tendency to tailor everything to the consumer is a consumerist principle. Using methods such as emotional music, inspirational testimonies, and exciting technology may get people to come back, but they cannot create saving faith which leads people to stay for the right reason. It is not wrong to strive toward making every person comfortable and excited for worship, but the Word of God cannot be replaced by something else that seems to be more effective at keeping people in the pews. Only the Word of God pulls us out of our individualist, materialist, consumerist, and postmodern mindset and into a true understanding of who God is and what he has done for us. When we gather for worship, we come together to receive from God what we truly need. It is a time for Christians to confess their sins and receive forgiveness through the words of the absolution, the water of Baptism, and the bread and wine together with the body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. It is a time for us to communicate with our God. We praise him for his love. We pray for his help and guidance. We thank him for all the gifts he has given us. These are all things God wants us to do. Through the means of grace which we receive in worship, our faith is built up through the powerful Word of God. This is what we need.

We are not commanded or forbidden to use any specific *method* of worship in our New Testament freedom. However, since the Word of God is the only thing that can truly change hearts and strengthen faith, it must remain central to what our worship is all about. Whether we are attempting to appeal to those who are already part of the flock or to those who are merely grazing in our field, the Word of God is the only effective tool for keeping people close to their God. This is our foundation for worship. The method we use should reflect this focus. Thankfully, the church since its beginnings has done this through the creeds, the liturgy and the hymns that have been passed down to us. These time-tested methods are not commanded by God, but it would seem wise to cling to these things that focus on the timeless truths of God’s Word and have survived generations of “felt-needs” developed by culture and situation.

Christians convey the depth and history of our God through the sacred times of renewal and formation we have in the church's calendar... Christian worship therefore is a good place for postmoderns to meet God because worship is where they can stand before the depth and wonder of what God has done down through the ages

⁶⁴ Fitch, 55.

and understand themselves in light of that. Such worship need not be “seeker sensitive.”⁶⁵

The depth and history of a tried and tested method for worship, I think, is underappreciated among us in this capitalist society. We tend to get excited for the new and greatest thing that will be “better.” With technology and science constantly improving the methods by which we do things in every other area of our lives, and a consumerist mentality drilled into our heads, we naturally want the latest development. However, when it comes to knowing God and worshiping him, a newer method developed with our culture and our wants in mind may not be what we need. It may feel good and get our emotions stirred, but is it feeding us with the Word? Does it build up our new self and beat down our old Adam? Is it teaching us that worship is about gathering together as believers to be fed and to grow in knowledge and depth of insight, whether we want to hear all of God’s Word or not? Will these new methods provide words for the old or dying to articulate their hope when they can remember nothing else? A new method of “doing” worship has a lot of questions to answer. The historical worship of the church has answered these questions. The historic liturgy, the creeds, and hymns have accomplished these things throughout the ages. Musical settings have changed and the instruments have shifted to best fit the needs of each situation, but the substance and structure drawn from Scripture has remained the same.

We make so many decisions on what we see and the instant results that we perceive, but what is the best decision to keep us rooted deeply and firmly in the Word of God for years to come? What will be truly successful in producing a crop that will grow strong roots instead of a crop that grows up quickly and dies because it has no root? Through worship, we want to do whatever we can to best bring in and keep souls rooted and sustained in the love of their God. Worship is not about fulfilling our wants. Worship is a time when we gather together to face the reality of our sin, to be healed and restored through the forgiveness won for us by Christ, to sing praises to our God and to be empowered by the gospel to serve. Let this be our goal whenever we gather together to worship our God.

Leadership

There is so much literature out there that applies principles of business leadership to church leadership. Can this have dangerous consequences on the focus and direction of our church? If our leaders are trained in the principles of success that business teaches, will they

⁶⁵ Fitch, 65.

create truly successful churches that teach the Word of God and care for souls, or will they be more concerned with the number of people in the pews and the efficiency of everything running smoothly and quickly? Ministry is messy and often times the opposite of efficient.⁶⁶ Ministry will always be messy because humans are a mess, and it often takes a long time, lots of individual care, and plenty of setbacks before any result may be seen. Ministry is not a one size fits all kind of thing. Likewise, the number of people in the pews can very poorly represent the actual number of Christians present. David Fitch challenges the premise that adapting business or capitalist principles comes without a price. Because of his different perspective, I heavily rely on his book in this section.

Fitch argues against a CEO-mentality toward leaders in our church. Here are some side-effects he identifies as consequences of being trained in a business model as a CEO-pastor:

- CEO-pastor-leaders do not serve, they lead; they do not submit to the community and the mutual gifts of the Spirit, they direct the organization; they do not see the church as an alive organism in which the Spirit moves to discern the future, they discern the future... Such pastor's character cannot help but become more controlling, authoritarian, and bottom-line oriented.⁶⁷
- Subtly, perhaps even unwittingly, moral behavior for the effective leader becomes a subset of whatever is necessary to be a successful leader in the church marketplace.⁶⁸
- Effective pastor-leaders are prone to deep emotional lows and emotional egotistical ecstasies with each failure or success because their emotions are formed in relation to success not faithfulness... prone to depression, fatigue, and mental breakdown.⁶⁹
- As a top-dog leader, you cannot show any weakness or flaw. By hiding these things a pastor isolates his faith life and leaves the guarding of his heart to himself. The pastor has no support-system even though he is also a sinful human being with flaws.⁷⁰

While Fitch makes some strong generalizations in his attack, I believe there is value in heeding his warning against simply adopting a business model without considering the shift in focus that may occur in our leaders of what is most important to the mission of the church.

What does a good leader of God's church look like? A leader in the church does not lead as one over the congregation but as one who uses his gifts within the limits given within

⁶⁶ Fitch, 80.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 86.

the body (Rom 12:3). This leader does not usurp authority over the congregation when there is a conflict (Mark 10:42-45). Instead, as with all members, the servant-pastor serves in mutual submission to the congregation (1 Cor 3:5-9). The servant-leader certainly carries broad vision and goals as part of his life, but ultimately he recognizes that the future of this church is God's, and the head of this body is Christ. Faithfulness takes propriety over success. Growth in the church as Christ's body matters as much as if not more than growth in numbers.⁷¹

How do we foster this kind of leader? Here are some suggestions Fitch gives which strangely enough, sound very similar to what we do in our Synod:

- Candidates for the ministry should come from the group of believers who have together studied the Word and handed down the teachings as they have been taught (2 Tim. 2:2).⁷²
- See seminaries as places of servant formation. Regular formative worship, confessional groups, and teaching of the disciplines all focus the gaze of the soul toward God, his glory, and his sovereignty and away from one's personal ego and success.⁷³
- "Form confessional groups for pastors." He says groups of pastors holding each other accountable may be good, but often in these professional settings it is hard for one to be truly honest and open. This may still lead to the pastor being isolated at home with his congregation. He advocates having a group of those who are mature in their faith and know the pastor well to be available for him to confess his sins, seek encouragement and advice, and receive forgiveness and help when needed.⁷⁴
- "Grow authentic leaders." He admits that this word, "authentic," is overused, but in our postmodern society, he makes the case that our culture wants leaders who are honest and open. They do not "lord over" as a different class of man but as another human being who serves in humility to the perfect One in heaven. This will foster trust in a trust-wary culture.⁷⁵

Are there benefits in studying overarching principles and strategies that work in business leadership? Yes! It is not wrong to know what our culture looks for in a leader. The important thing to remember is this: Scripture must always remain the base for how we judge what a leader looks like and what makes him effective/successful.

⁷¹ Fitch, 88.

⁷² Ibid., 90.

⁷³ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 91,92.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 93.

Evangelism

The challenge of evangelism in our present culture is a deep-seated distrust and skepticism of the truthfulness of the message and the messenger. Each individual is bombarded by sales pitches with new and improved ways to enhance one's life. Why should they believe we have anything worthwhile to offer? How do we convey that the message of the Bible is different? How do we impress the value of spiritual and eternal life in a culture all about the physical life here and now? The message we have is unlike any other. It stands on a foundation that does not change. The love exemplified by our Savior is so other-worldly; it testifies to itself that it has value above and beyond what can be found anywhere else. The question is how do we expose others to this message that speaks for itself? How do we show the peace of God which transcends all understanding?

“In the rhythms of life we give witness to who we are and the power of God's salvation in Jesus Christ set loose in our midst.”⁷⁶ Through the way we act toward our neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family, we display the love of Jesus that has transformed our life. While this is not a novel concept, I think it has become less and less of a reality. In the abundance of material blessings and the security we feel as a nation, I believe we are often guilty of forgetting the real reason we are at peace and the task we have been given: to share the good news everyday and everywhere. The urgency of our mission does not seem so urgent when life is good and death seems so far away.

Here are three steps that might help us to think of ourselves as daily evangelists. The first step in being a good evangelist is to stay rooted in the Word daily. The more the Word of God fills our hearts and minds, the more it will flow out naturally in the things we do and say.

We do not need to say anything we would not ordinarily say. We do not need a method or a conniving plan to convince them of Christ. That is the Holy Spirit's work. We just live until this person asks what is different about the way we live. (1 Peter 3:15-16)⁷⁷

The second step is for us to think of ourselves as a missionary for Christ in every situation. Here are some practical things I believe we can do to take our perspective from a capitalist way of thinking to a biblical mission-minded way of thinking: Remind yourself where your blessings and abilities come from; take time to evaluate what your actions display as most

⁷⁶ Fitch, 62.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 60.

important; ask yourself during every challenge how you can show your deep confidence in God to take care of you; give generously. Third, in our encounters with others, we approach these moments with the thought: I can sacrifice my own good for the sake of this person. This idea is not natural to our capitalist minds, but it is very natural to the new person created by Christ. Since it is not a normal thing in our capitalist culture to be self-sacrificing, it stands out all the more when someone is willing to sacrifice their time, effort, and ability to care, listen, or help without an ulterior motive. This type of evangelism is not about selling the truth but making it real and living. It is a personal testimony that our worth is found in something else that fills us to the brim.

It is not a consumer appeal. It is a carnival in the village, a boisterous parade, beautiful floats, vivid symbols, and a way of living so powerful that it threatens the surrounding principalities and powers. It is the march of victory over sin and death begun in Christ to be consummated in his return.⁷⁸

In this culture of distrust and skepticism, nothing speaks louder than the personal display of faith in our lives. This is not being sold or forced onto anyone, but through our actions others see the confidence we have. It is through our own understanding of how Christ has fundamentally changed who we are and how we think about everything that gives the greatest testimony to those who are missing the one thing needful.

As a living vibrant people, Christians do not sell, they just live; they do not peddle, but do speak sincerely; they do not debate, they witness to his presence in worship and invite people into this great victory over sin and death we have in Christ's death and resurrection.⁷⁹

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God. 2 Cor 2:14-17 NIV11

Here is a quick summary of thoughts to evangelize counter to the culture of capitalism: Do not sell church or make it cheap; do tell the good news and live it; show genuine love and concern; treat everyone as someone Christ has died for; be self-sacrificing.

⁷⁸ Fitch., 70.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Community

Being made a child of God pulls us out of our individual self-centered life and places us into a community with God and fellow believers. Paul tells us that through Baptism we have become one body (1 Cor 12:13). Each part of that body does not act independently, but the body acts as one in service to Christ, its head (Eph 4:15). Even though capitalism does not demand any allegiance from us to others, our faith compels us to serve the needs of our brothers and sisters in the faith. “When we do so, we break the determinations put upon us by our capitalism and democracy that keeps us ‘to ourselves.’”⁸⁰ God calls us into a community that genuinely cares about one another. It is driven by the selfless love of God and strives to encourage and strengthen everyone in it. The beauty of thinking of the church as a body helps us to understand how many individuals, with unique qualities and gifts, can each serve one another in different and complimentary ways. It is a gift from God to not have to walk this life alone. We have others who can bear with us our weaknesses and struggles.

In his book, *What Ever Happened to Commitment*, Edward Dayton accuses the church of abandoning this sense of community: “We are more committed to the secular company for which we work than we are to the local church to which we claim to be related.”⁸¹ While I do not agree that this is always the case, I do think he brings out an inconsistency that we often see in our congregations. I think many of our members would agree with his observation! As a church, we tend to be a community in a very loose sense.⁸² My question is this: can we develop this body mentality and create a deeper, more personal community that inspires its members to sacrifice their autonomy? We are happy to help when it fits our schedule, but what if we put Bible studies, service projects, potlucks, evangelism nights, and church retreats into our calendars first? If something else comes up we turn it down because we have something for church already slotted in. We contribute after our budgets are secure, but what if we delegate our offerings for church and member assistance first, and then let the rest of the finances be subject to what is left? What I am attempting to demonstrate through these two examples is a mentality shift. Instead of thinking first of our own personal finances, time, security etc., we think first of the community of Christ of which we are a part. Before I decide what is best for me, I meet with the community and see what is most needed by the body. I am not saying that we create a mini-communist colony in our

⁸⁰ Fitch, 60.

⁸¹ Dayton, 62.

⁸² I’m speaking generally here and do not imply that this is always the case.

churches. What I am suggesting is that we begin to think even more like a community that can depend on each other physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This I believe will help us practice our trust in God, our love for one another, and our devotion to the mission of the church.

This display of interdependence would also speak all the more to those outside of the community that something is very different about the Christian worldview. By practicing hospitality to others, we give them a taste of the community to which we belong. This can be as simple as inviting someone over for dinner.

By inviting strangers over to dinner, we resist the fragmenting isolating forces of late capitalism in America. The time-honored practice of hospitality is so exceedingly rare today that just doing it at all speaks volumes about what it means to be a Christian in a world of strangers.⁸³

Individuals who feel isolated and abandoned in this individualistic culture would see trust, depth, love, and commitment being causally given to one another. What a stark contrast that would be to the cold machine of capitalism all around them. Our society is starved for a sense of community and belonging. I believe this to be one of our greatest strengths as Christians called to be one body. We are bred to provide for one another what we lack individually, and to receive together the things only God can give.

Conclusion

Our God came into this sin-sick world as a man in order to rescue all of mankind. He was pierced for our transgressions so that we could be called children of God. Because of him, anyone who believes in him can call heaven his home. This sin-sick world could never provide us with the comfort or safety, the success or purpose that we so eagerly desire. Only our Savior can fill the longing of broken and weary hearts. This is the treasure that sustains Christians around the world no matter what economic system they find themselves in. This pearl of great price is worth more than anything this world can offer.

As Christians living in America, I pray that we strive to be defined by what he tells us in his Word even if that makes us stand out more and more from what our capitalist context dictates. Through selflessness, contentment, generosity, commitment, and love, I believe we can counter the superficiality, efficiency, and coldness of capitalism. In our

⁸³ Fitch, 60.

churches, let us continue to keep the Bible and its wisdom as the foundation of what we do, how we do it, and why it matters. Our congregations are not small businesses. They are the living and breathing body of Christ. His body is alive and personal. We are to be a community that serves God and one another. May our lives be constant reflections of the depth of Christ's love that cannot be faked or sold. Jesus is not simply an item we add to our shopping cart. He is not a compliment to a full cabinet of other consumer goods. He is not a gift we take and then place in the attic. Jesus is everything we need for contentment, satisfaction, success, happiness and salvation. He is the only reality in this world of fallacy.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:6-7 NIV84

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