

## Creation Care: Ideas and Proposals

One of the benefits of working in part-time ministry while depending upon full-time employment in secular consumer society to earn a living is having “front row seats” to two arenas in life: the spiritual and the material.

My full-time employment is in retail. What’s happening in that industry, as in our society in general, is deeply spiritually disturbing. There is an ongoing and insatiable demand for “more.”

From the industry it’s more sales, profits and production. From consumers it’s more choices, deals and products. I have two areas of concern as I look at this shared cultural standard. First, what are we doing to ourselves spiritually (especially given that newspaper ads have replaced the Bible as our Sunday morning reading material)? Second, what are we doing to our planet as a result of this constant need for “more”? We take more and more resources from the earth to make products to satisfy our material cravings, only to get bored with them down the road and throw them into landfills.

In an article from the “Christian Century” Walter Brueggeman succinctly describes the situation: “Consumerism is not simply a marketing strategy. *It has become a demonic spiritual force among us...*” (italics mine). As someone working in retail, I see this demonic spiritual force in action every single day. I am not exaggerating at all when I say that this absolutely terrifies me on a spiritual level.

Walter Bruggeman concludes that observation saying that “the theological question facing us is whether the gospel has the power to help us withstand it.” While I put enormous faith in the power of the gospel to withstand it, I believe that we need to develop a spiritual strategy to engage the cultural dynamics we face. It is with that in mind that I offer these ideas for a presentation for the Creation Care team.

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The single driving force for me in ministry is my conviction that the problems facing our nation and our world are not political, but spiritual in nature. Not recognizing that spiritual element, we try to solve them through political and/or economic policies. Some policies work short term, some not at all, some seem to but then don’t, and so on. Few ever enjoy permanence.

However, what would happen if we applied spiritually based policies in our culture? I refer specifically to the Biblical principles of loving God with all you are, loving your neighbor as yourself, the Golden rule (do unto others...), its “negative” counterpart (don’t do to others that which is harmful to you) and, perhaps, for good measure, Philippians 2:3-5 (“do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves...”).

If we followed those five precepts, it would be impossible for us to act – or even *think* - in ways that would exploit others. I'll repeat that for emphasis. It would be impossible for us to think or act in ways that exploit others if we were to follow Biblical precepts.

Likewise, it would be impossible for us to think or act in ways that exploit our Earth if we held our environmental awareness to those same standards. For example, is it not selfish ambition that drives us as a culture to permit fracking so liberally? Would we be so quick to do it if we, in humility, regarded the Earth as being “better than ourselves?” Yet, as the physical sustainer of life provided for us by God, the Earth certainly is more important than us and our personal desires. But in our profit-oriented society, many view it as nothing more than a means of resources for our own exploitation.

What causes this sense of entitlement? I suggest it is the continuation of original sin. It gives us a sense of inflated self-importance, which currently leads to the exploitation of others and of our planet.

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So the question might then be: what is original sin? Obviously there is a lot of variation of thought given the complexity of theology surrounding it. For purposes of understanding it within the framework of Creation Care, I would suggest reducing it to one basic act of Adam and Eve which we all continue to do today, especially given America's consumer culture.

Despite having all their physical needs met, via access to all the abundance that God provided, Adam and Eve listened to an outside voice that told them that they would be better off if they had even more. All that God provided still wasn't enough. They had to have it all, the whole garden. They couldn't leave just one thing untouched as God commanded. They believed what the snake told them: “You shall become as gods.”

How does that translate to us today? I believe Adam and Eve are archetypes of us all; their mistakes will be our mistakes. When we listen to another voice besides God's, especially one that convinces us that we should have more and will become greater if we get more, we will destroy whatever paradise God may intend for us. In the framework of Creation Care, we see that we are destroying our very planet; that which God created to sustain life for us in the first place.

Walter Brueggeman, in the aforementioned article, also says that “We have a love affair with ‘more’—and we will never have enough.” The advertising voice in the world continually prods us to buy more. Is that the same voice of the serpent speaking to us now through advertisers, still convincing us that we always need more?

In the New Testament, Scripture warns us that “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” (II Cor. 11:4) If that is the case, can Satan not also masquerade as an innocent cartoon mouse, a Disney princess, a cute yellow minion, a Star Wars hero or any other charming and seemingly harmless character to become a marketable commodity for

birthdays or Christmas? And while people may find such novelties endearing, we know that they are mainly produced in China (*cheaply*) by exploited workers and at a huge cost to the environment in their raw materials. Is there insidious spiritual danger for us in this?

Despite how antithetical that may seem to Biblical standards and the gospel message, many of us listen to that voice that convinces us that we should have all of these things. Then the next marketable commodities arrive via a new Disney or action movie, a new marketing gimmick, etc. The old ones fade away, the cycle starts anew and the public clamors for the new junk. Do we ever hear that Scriptural, prophetic voice that asks, “Why do you spend your labor on that which does not satisfy?”

As Brueggeman has said, “Consumerism is not simply a marketing strategy. It has become a demonic spiritual force among us.” So what do we do about that spiritual force among us?

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First, we have to make ourselves aware; aware of the things we buy and why we buy them. We have to be aware of what (or *whose*) voice is prodding us. Paul advises in Romans, “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it *without even thinking* (italics mine). Instead, fix your attention on God...” (Romans 12:2, The Message) Are our shopping habits in sync with the gospel? The more we become aware, the more we can focus on changing our own consumer habits.

Second, we need to evaluate how we view the Earth. Do we read Genesis and see it through spiritual eyes? Do we see creation as our Creator does? Genesis quotes God as saying “it is good, it is good, it is very good.” Do we see the Earth that way? How do we treat the good things that God has given us? The way the culture around us does (exploit for our own profits and wants) or do we observe a higher standard?

Third, once we become more aware ourselves and change our habits, we can work to find ways to introduce change to the culture around us.

My experience in the retail/consumer culture coupled with my theological work in ministry tells me that Walter Brueggeman’s observation that consumerism has become a demonic spiritual force among us is absolutely true. Consumerism is a spiritual problem with dire physical/environmental consequences for us if don’t confront it and slow down our consumptive practices.

Yet, while we may understand the spiritual nature of the issue, it is beyond the scope of the culture around us at the moment. We need to raise our own personal awareness while also trying to raise the awareness of the culture around us. That has always been the challenge of those of us called to first follow, and then evangelize the gospel.

In the meantime, we still have to promote environmental awareness, making it as simple and basic as possible. To that end, a very simple sentence would go a very long way in changing our environmental landscape: “Consume less, recycle more.”