

INTRODUCTION

Americans apparently want Christ, but they do not want him straight.

ROBERT DETWEILER

It was Billy Sunday who, in addition to saving thousands of souls and raising millions of dollars for the war effort in the late 1910s, snarled, “Turn Hell upside down and what do you find stamped on the bottom? Made in Germany!” What so enraged the revivalist and ordained Presbyterian minister about the Germans was that they had undermined biblical authority. They had exported higher criticism to the fine shores of America, dismantling the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Worse yet, the Germans had begun the hellish course of severing the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history. It was Adolf Harnack and Albert Schweitzer, and before them Ferdinand Christian Bauer and David Friedrich Strauss, and even before them H. E. G. Paulus and Herman Samuel Reimarus—Germans all—who had quested after the historical Jesus, leaving the Gospels churned up in the wake. Yes, Mr. Sunday thundered, Germany was to blame.

Sunday makes a fair point. One thesis to account for religious decline in twentieth-century America has Germany’s higher criticism subtly eroding biblical authority until all manner of evil breaks loose in time for the 1920s and the Scopes Trial and the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. There might, after all, be credence to Sunday’s argument. Yet something else lurks around the edges of Sunday’s retort: a quite (un)healthy dose of patriotism pulses through it, a patriotism that blinds Sunday to the complicity of his own nation in the so-called making of hell. Stamped not too far away from “Made in Germany” one might see “Made in America,” as well. Long before Bauer and Strauss and the Tübingen School set to work unraveling the Gospel narratives, Thomas Jefferson grabbed a pair of scissors and began cutting and pasting his

own version of the Gospels, excised of those aspects odious to *Reason*, the Enlightenment's best friend. And as Tom Paine, the great pamphleteer of the Revolutionary War, lay on his deathbed, he mustered enough strength to write that Jesus and the disciples were a story copped from Eastern religions, "a parody on the sun and the twelve signs of the Zodiac." Whatever Jefferson and Paine lacked in scholarship (compared to the German efforts at textual criticism), they made up for in raw ingenuity. So it may be argued, with apologies to Sunday, that America has its own quest for Jesus, its own reshaping of the Son of God, fashioning him into something more palatable to American tastes and acceptable to American sensibilities. Only in America would you find such books as *Jesus, CEO* or its sequel, *Jesus in Blue Jeans*.

As historian Stephen Prothero puts it, "Jesus has an American history."¹ For some Americans, Jesus is the consummate best friend and lover. For others, he is strong and mighty, ready for the defense of the weak. For others still, he's a guru, a wise and enlightened sage. For American Roman Catholics, he is first the Savior on the cross, bloodied and suffering. For American Protestants, he is first, largely due to the prominence of Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* (1941), nearly angelic, soft and beloved by children. For countercultural rebels, he's a crazed malcontent, hurling the establishment—in the form of money changers—from the temple. For the inimitable Johnny Cash, he's "The Greatest Cowboy of them all."

Jesus, like most cultural heroes, is malleable. And his given shape has much more to say about the shapers than it does of him. Christians in all cultures and ages have the tendency to impose their understandings and cultural expressions on Scripture or beliefs. The pictures in woodcuts prepared for Bibles during the Reformation era look remarkably similar to scenes prevalent in the sixteenth, not the first, century. Medieval theologians imbued their discussions of Christology with language and concepts that might surprise even the most knowledgeable and cosmopolitan of the twelve disciples. But there is something peculiar to the tendency to contemporize in American evangelicalism. This may be explained on four counts. First, American evangelicals reflexively harbor suspicions of tradition. In fact, most tend toward being (rabidly) antitradition. Consequently, the past is overlooked as a significant source of direction. This leaves

¹Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), p. 9.

American evangelicals more vulnerable than most when it comes to cultural pressures and influences. In the absence of tradition, we tend to make up a new one, one not tested by time and more or less constructed by individuals or by a limited community. This antitradition animus arises from what Sidney Mead once labeled *historylessness*, and what I have elsewhere called *ahistoricism*. This is the tendency of Americans in general to be not only amnesiacs of the past but to be amnesiacs who aren't necessarily looking to be cured.²

Second, American evangelicals, when they do dip into tradition, tend only to find Luther's *sola scriptura* principle. The use of this principle not only denigrates tradition but also results in a naive hermeneutic and theology. The mistaken conclusion is that because American evangelicals hold firmly and prize *sola scriptura*, it naturally follows that all of the beliefs of American evangelicals naturally flow from the pages of Scripture. "I'm a biblicist," as one might say, is tantamount to saying "My ideas and beliefs are biblical." Third, American evangelicals tend toward an objectivist or foundational epistemology. This is a particular way of understanding knowledge and how we come to accept certain things as knowledge. The objectivist or foundational approach posits that knowledge is fundamentally objective, even neutral. Putting the matter differently, when a tree falls in the woods, it does make a sound even if no one hears it. Recent work in epistemology has raised awareness of how much we as the subjects, the knowers, bring to the table when we talk about knowledge, or the object or thing known. In other words, we have biases and presuppositions and limited perspectives, all of which impact the way we acquire knowledge. Much of contemporary evangelicalism, or at least evangelicalism of the past decades, operates under the assumption that we are neutral in the acquisition of knowledge. The upshot of all this is that our ideas or beliefs are not held as *our* ideas or beliefs but as *the* ideas or beliefs.⁵

²See Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Illustrated Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997) for a comprehensive history of the appropriations of Jesus throughout history in various cultures and religions. For a helpful discussion of the value that tradition can play in the life of the church, especially for evangelicals, see D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). See also Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977).

⁵For Luther's intention of *sola scriptura* versus its use in contemporary American evangelicalism, see Stephen J. Nichols, *Martin Luther: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2002), pp. 76-82. For a discussion of the epistemological shift and its impact on theological methodology, see John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

Finally, American evangelicals are strongly influenced by pietism, which emphasizes personal religious experience, and values devotion and practice over doctrine. For example, pietism leads us to say that imitating Christ is far better than having a right set of beliefs about who Christ is. Pietism leads to viewing Christ primarily from the lens of personal experience rather than the lenses of the Gospel pericopes or of theological formulations. David Wells offers a fascinating example of this in his *No Place for Truth*. He contrasts two sets of articles in *Christianity Today* that appeared thirty years apart. The first, from 1959, dealt with Easter by lining up articles on the historicity of the event, apologetic discussions of the resurrection and theological reflections. The next set of articles appeared in 1989. This time prominent popular authors such as Walter Wangerin and Philip Yancey approached the event of the resurrection from the perspective of “What does the resurrection mean to me?” Once launched through that portal, “reflections of personal experience,” using the words of Wells, filled the magazine’s columns.⁴

These theological and philosophical impulses of ahistoricism, biblicism, foundationalism and pietism all conspire to make American evangelicals quite susceptible to culture in the shaping of beliefs and interpretation of Scripture. And perhaps nowhere is this more poignantly felt than in the area of Christology and the shape and identity of Jesus, the American Jesus.⁵

Certainly that has not always been, nor is it always presently, the case. The New England Puritans had a very high view of Christ. They would likely, if we could transport them forward to our time, blush at the contemporary overfamiliarity in our references to the second person of the Trinity. Further, the narrative of American Christology contains plenty of dissenters from the Jeffersonian trajectory. For every Harry Emerson Fosdick, there is a J. Gresham Machen. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for the notion that there is a distinctly American religious Christology, speaking more broadly, and an American evangelical Christology, speaking closer to home. This distinct American Christology is shaped in many ways by distinctly American ideals, such as rugged individualism or an ethic of consumption. This distinct Chris-

⁴David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 210.

⁵For a provocative discussion of American evangelicals’ tortured relationship with culture, see D. G. Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002).

tology is also shaped by particular American experiences, such as the frontier or the experiment in democracy. Some of these ideals and experiences are perennial, while some shift as cultural moods and expressions wax and wane. They all influence the way we read the Gospels, adding distinctive color to the picture of Jesus that emerges. This book is an attempt to unveil these pictures of Jesus in American evangelicalism, to tell the story of his American evangelical incarnations.

Among the works that have treated this topic, R. Laurence Moore's *Touchdown Jesus*, Clint Willis and Nate Hardcastle's *Jesus Is Not a Republican* and Dan Gilgoff's *The Jesus Machine* get at the misappropriations, in the authors' views, of Jesus' conscription in American politics. Books on this topic keep coming. Two other studies have sketched this story of the American Jesus more programmatically, though both have dealt with American religion much more broadly than evangelicalism or even Christianity. Richard Wightman Fox's *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* carefully walks through American history from the time of its European settlement to the present day. Along the way Fox explores the impact of the cultural adaptations of Jesus for theology and religion, and also locates the historical and present depictions and depictees of Christ in the culture wars. Stephen Prothero's *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* takes a more thematic approach, looking at the appropriations of Jesus in American Christianity as well as within popular African American culture, Mormonism, Judaism and various forms of Hinduism and Buddhism. Writing nearly forty years before Fox and Prothero, Robert Detweiler, after surveying Christ in American fiction, had already reached the conclusion that "Americans apparently want Christ, but they do not want him straight."⁶

In this book I cover some of the same terrain as Fox and Prothero but also venture into texts not considered by either one. The scope of this book is more sharply focused. While issues and influences of American religion

⁶R. Laurence Moore, *Touchdown Jesus: Mixing Sacred and Secular in America* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Clint Willis and Nate Hardcastle, eds., *Jesus Is Not a Republican: The Religious Right's War on America* (New York: Avalon, 2005); Dan Gilgoff, *The Jesus Machine: How James Dobson, Focus on the Family, and Evangelical America Are Winning the Culture War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007); Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2004); Prothero, *American Jesus*; and Robert Detweiler, "Christ in American Religious Fiction," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32, no. 1 (1964): 15.

more broadly speaking will come into play, the primary concern here centers on American evangelicalism. Fox and Prothero have both accomplished drawing attention to the explicit ways cultural forces have shaped the identity of the American Jesus. This book attempts the same for the American evangelical Jesus.

Historians of American religion, from Sidney Mead to Mark Noll and D. G. Hart, as well as American theologians, from H. Richard Niebuhr to Michael Horton and David Wells, have uncovered a particular insight—that theology, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Theologizing, in other words, is influenced by culture. One of the first books that got me thinking in this direction was Michael Horton’s *Made in America*. Reading that book was like pulling back the curtain to see the wizard at the controls. If what Horton and company wrote is true, then what occurs in culture certainly affects the theology and life of the church. And given the centrality of Christology, understanding how culture affects our thinking of Jesus and his identity could not be more important for the mission of the church. Pulling back this curtain might be painful but nevertheless necessary.⁷

In trying to tell this story, I have chosen many “texts” that bear witness to an American evangelical Christology. These texts, some lost to contemporary readers, all played a pivotal role in their time—or are at least reflective of larger currents of their time—in one way or another. These texts include books, essays, sermons, presidential inaugural speeches, songs, artwork and film. They also include artifacts from material culture, ranging from Victorian tree toppers to bracelets with a quartet of well-known initials. These artifacts perhaps best get at the evangelical impulse, since this is where most evangelicals not only live out but literally wear their Christianity.

I have framed this story as a cultural history. While there is a chronological flow, I’m more interested in the highlights of that flow than in a comprehensive treatment of the details. Consequently, this book is a series of “snapshots” or of “sightings” of the American Jesus—and, like UFOs or Elvis, he shows up in the most interesting places. The first four chapters roam from the

⁷Michael Scott Horton, *Made in America: The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); David Wells, *No Place for Truth, and Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); D. G. Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America, and Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); and Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. The next four camp out in the latter half of the twentieth and the dawn of the twenty-first centuries. Combined, these chapters reveal the making of the American Jesus.

We begin with New England Puritans, the theological heavyweights. Edward Taylor was little known until his cache of poetry hidden in Yale's Beinecke Library was discovered in the early twentieth century. He once preached a tour-de-force sermon series on two-nature Christology. Not only did Taylor stretch the series into fourteen sermon units, which would have been preached for far more than fourteen Sundays, but he even went so far as to embellish the series with a Latin title: *Christographia* (1701-1703). Taylor also spent most of his Saturday evenings composing poems as he contemplated the person of Christ, prompted by the Lord's Supper he would be administering the next day. These poems, collected as *Preparatory Meditations*, span from the 1680s through the 1720s, though existing in virtual obscurity for over two centuries.

One cannot talk about New England Puritans without mentioning Jonathan Edwards, whose work has been anything but obscure. Edwards had not only the foresight to see the perennial value of a robust Christology for the church—and so devoted much of his preaching to it—but he also had the prescience to see age-old Arianism washing ashore in New England. What Edwards suspected would happen did happen in the 1810s, when William Ellery Channing led the old Puritan Congregational churches into the tall grass of Unitarianism. In the Puritans, one sees the triumph of the word over image. Cultural historians attribute the word's victory to the Puritan's iconophobia, owing to their view of the Second Commandment, which they inherited from John Calvin. Eventually, however, the image would come to overtake the word.

After the Puritans we'll look at the formative decades of the emerging and early Republic. Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, Adams, Paine: all had a great deal (or very little, depending on how you judge it) to say about Christ. Much attention has been turned on the founders and their religion, attention that has resulted in deeply heated debates. One thing can be said for certain, however: the founders did set many significant trajectories for the American Jesus. In fact they are of such prominence that they have essentially obscured the Puritan view of Jesus. Once the Republic was established, America pushed westward with vengeance, introducing the ethos of the frontier to

mass American culture, symbolized in Andrew Jackson and the Jacksonian era of politics, culture and religion. The rugged frontier ethos sparked a reaction in the opposite direction, ushering the more refined and genteel Victorian era. Jesus was retooled to fit both frontier and Victorian cultures, morphing from a rough and tumble scion of true grit to Jesus as gentle, meek and mild. Chapter three explores these pendulum swings, while taking a glance at Jesus in the Civil War.

The story that dominates American religion from the close of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth is that of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, the subject of chapter four. Christology took center stage in this debate. Here Harry Emerson Fosdick provides the perfect foil for J. Gresham Machen, as close to a theological prize fight as one might ever find. While these four chapters trace the evolution of the American evangelical Jesus from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth, the next four chapters turn the spotlight on events and occasions more closely related to our times. These chapters wade in the waters of popular culture, which Andrew Greeley has described as the *locus theologicus* of our age; that is, pop culture is not only where people live, it's also the place where we moderns like to do theology. And in this respect, American evangelicals seem ideally suited to the climates of pop culture.

Chapter five begins this quest with the story of the Jesus Movement and the founding era of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). A billion dollar business, CCM is a network of recording companies, radio stations, retail outlets and megagroups and fans, all topped off by its own awards show. CCM represents for many contemporary evangelicals the sum of their theological training and discipleship.

Evangelicals, as well as the general public, have also learned of Jesus through his many portrayals on the silver screen. Consequently, film, stretching back from old black-and-white silents right up to the present box office offerings, is the subject of chapter six. Chapter seven explores the evangelical consumer culture. The marketing of Jesus has been quite successful, at least in terms of sales. This phenomenon, perhaps, reached a zenith with the remarkably successful WWJD—What Would Jesus Do?—cottage industry. The case of WWJD is an intriguing one. On the one hand, it so reflects the tendencies of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, the era of consumerism and the revolving doors of passing fads. On the other hand, there is some-

thing perennial about it. In the late 1800s Charles Monroe Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1897) advanced a WWJD-styled approach to the life of Christ. Many centuries prior to that, it was Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* (1393). Contemporary audiences have simply reduced such book-length treatments down to four little initials that fetch big profits.

Chapter eight steps into the currently troubled waters of religion and politics. The last several presidents have claimed to be born again. But with George W. Bush such political God talk has become remarkably Jesus centered. When then Governor Bush told an audience of the Republican presidential candidates' debate that the political philosopher who influenced him the most was Jesus, he signaled this new era. Since then, Jesus has been a prominent part of both evangelicalism's right and left wings of political engagement. Evangelicals are clearly influencing politics in America, perhaps like never before. This chapter turns the tables, exploring how all of this political engagement has affected evangelicalism and the evangelical Jesus.

This survey of the American evangelical Jesus intends to do more than inform. It intends to raise significant questions about the state of Christology in American evangelicalism. Consequently, the epilogue holds up the American evangelical Jesus as a mirror for our own self-examination. This self-examination becomes all the more important when we realize that Christology has everything to do with the church's task of proclaiming the gospel.

Some, such as David Wells, have argued rather persuasively that contemporary American evangelicalism lacks a robust theological center and, what's worse, the skill and the moral will to construct one. Such judgments don't bode well for the future of evangelicalism, especially in terms of Christology. A rigorous and detailed and even fought-for Christology was the lifeblood of the early church. Early Christians recognized that Christianity would indeed stand or fall based on how it settled the question of Christ's identity. So they debated. They debated the subtle distinctions between the terms *nature* and *person*, and on the issue of the Trinity, *person* and *substance*. They agonized over the biblical data. Getting it right on Christology meant everything to the early church. The church fathers labored over Christology not because they enjoyed splitting theological hairs and relished a good debate, but because if they didn't, there would not be much of a Christianity at all. In the words of the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds, Christ is the God-man, two natures con-

joined in one person, “for us and for our salvation.”⁸

The history of the American evangelical Jesus reveals that such complexities as the two natures of Christ have often been brushed aside, either on purpose or out of expediency. Too often his deity has been eclipsed by his humanity, and occasionally the reverse is true. Too often American evangelicals have settled for a Christology that can be reduced to a bumper sticker. Too often devotion to Jesus has eclipsed theologizing about Jesus. Today’s American evangelicals may be quick to speak of their love for Jesus, even wearing their devotion on their sleeve, literally in the case of WWJD bracelets. But they may not be so quick to articulate an orthodox view of the object of their devotion. Their devotion is commendable, but the lack of a rigorous theology behind it means that a generation of contemporary evangelicals is living off of borrowed capital. This quest for the historical Jesus of American evangelicalism is not just a story of the past; it perhaps will help us understand the present, and it might even be a parable for the future. This parable teaches us that Jesus is not actually *made* in America. He is made and remade and remade again. What will next year’s model look like?

⁸See Stephen J. Nichols, *For Us and for Our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007).

JESUS ON A BRACELET

Christ, Commodification and Consumer Culture

Jesus Christ—He's the Real Thing!

FROM A T-SHIRT

Christianity is becoming more of a currency than a belief.

MADONNA

*For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word,
but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God,
in the sight of God we speak in Christ.*

2 COR 2:17

In 1996 the mammoth Anaheim Convention Center played host to one of the largest trade shows in American retail, the annual show of the Christian Booksellers Association. These were the days before Amazon, which is to say these were the days when people bought their books from local stores. And the store owners were there en masse at the trade show, housed in the convention center, to stock up on the latest bestsellers and to return home with giveaway tote bags, signed books, bumper stickers and enough pens, notepads, and key chains to withstand a long siege.¹

Just about all of the convention center's 80,000 square feet was filled with stuff beyond your imagination. I attended that year, and the show, coupled

¹CBA no longer calls itself the Christian Booksellers Association but the Association for Christian Retail. And CBA's annual trade show is the International Christian Retail Show (ICRS).

with my first pilgrimage to California, had such a dizzying effect that I only recall a bit of the spectacle. First, not only was I staying in the same hotel, but I was on the same floor as the hottest ticket in Christian music at that time, dc Talk. I confess I timed my departures from the hotel at the same time as dc Talk, walking behind them so as to appear to be part of their entourage. As for the convention itself, I remember one company hawking jewelry made with tiny pieces of stone from the tomb of Christ. The three or four entrepreneurs who owned the company hoped to hook passersby with a taped and relentlessly repeating infomercial hosted by Ricardo Montalban. Fantasy Island's former host and the unforgettable voice extolling the virtues of the Chrysler Cordoba's "rich Corinthian leather" now rapturously lured buyers with hopes of feeling Christ's presence as the stone, hewn from the tomb of Christ, gently hung on their customer's neck or encircled their wrists and fingers. Then there was the not-so-subtle promotion of Jim Bakker's tell-all account of his fall from grace, *I Was Wrong*. His publisher had made sure this landmark book would not be missed. Four-foot by six-foot posters of the cover, with a forlorn-looking Bakker, flanked the perimeter of the three-story framed "booth." A spiral staircase took would-be music buyers from this particular publisher's music label to its third floor. Jars of Clay had released *Flood* earlier that year. Their music label was giving away a truck. One final memory concerns the legendary Charlton Heston. I stood in the long line to get his autograph on a poster promoting his dramatic recording of the Bible. As he signed it, I told him how much I liked his Bud Light commercials, which had been airing ever since they were unveiled during the Super Bowl that January. He didn't seem amused. Perhaps for him too the Christian Booksellers Association trade show had taken its toll. He could withstand chariots in *Ben Hur*, Pharaoh in *Moses* and even the evil assembly in *Planet of the Apes*. But at the CBA show, had Charlton Heston met his match?²

What would Jesus do? I pondered, as I walked the aisles of CBA. He certainly was there, ubiquitously in fact. Paintings, note cards, bumper stickers, bracelets, ties, pins, and all sorts of jewelry, puppets, and more bore the image and likeness of Jesus. Jesus was for sale, and sales were brisk. Commodifying Christ, turning him into a commodity, is nothing new. As we saw in chapter

²The CBA annual show and convention in 2003 filled 350,000 square feet of convention center space when it returned to a significantly enlarged Anaheim Convention Center.

three, such marketing of Jesus and Christianity flourished in the nineteenth century. In the early years of the sixteenth century, Martin Luther thought the church was hawking Christ, causing him to launch a protest that changed the world. While selling Jesus is not unique to our present age, it might be safe to say there is a heightened element to it that far outstrips previous ages. Our culture as a whole has increasingly become commodified, and advertising has increasingly pervaded all of life. Indeed, some creative college students went so far as to offer themselves as living billboards to any corporations in order to pay tuition. "The United States," writes economist and social analyst Juliet Schor, "is the most consumer-oriented society in the world." And in our consumer culture Christianity is not lagging behind. In fact, Colleen McDannell and R. Laurence Moore have argued that it might very well be Christians desirous of spreading the good news who have led the vanguard in the marketplace.⁵

From the outset of this chapter on consumerism and Christianity, it might be said that such cynical views ignore or downplay the sincere efforts of many who are not selling these goods simply to make a buck but are earnestly trying to do something that they believe is contributing to the church and spreading the gospel, while also making a living in the process. If people need to wear T-shirts and people need to make T-shirts, then why not wear and make T-shirts that serve higher purposes in addition to economic ones? It might be difficult to argue against that. However, I wish to pose the question from the angle of what happens to the message of the gospel in the process of this buying and selling. What happens to Christ in this culture of consumerism? This question becomes all the more urgent when the negative influence of the commercialization and marketing of Christ gets noticed by a watching and increasingly more cynical public.

Such marketing of Christianity hasn't escaped the ever-sardonic, animated show *The Simpsons*. In an episode titled "She of Little Faith," disaster has come to Springfield as a rocket, launched by Homer Simpson, crashes into the church. Left without resources to repair the church, the congregation consents to allow Mr. Burns, looking rather devilish, to rebuild the

⁵Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy* (New York: Scribner, 2005), p. 9. See Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995); and R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

church on the condition that he operate it as a business. The church will now be sponsored, like a NASCAR team, complete with banners and commercial announcements by the pastor during the sermons. Pews are replaced with theater seats, and kiosks surround the interior of the church auditorium, along with concession stands and JumboTrons. The congregation filters in, ecstatic over their new church. Amidst the gaping mouths and wide eyes, the sagacious character Lisa is dumbfounded. She asks, "What are they doing to the church?" only to be met with the reply, "We're rebranding it. The old church was skewing pious. We prefer a faith-based emporium teeming with impulse-buy items." The new church is also rebranding Jesus. Throughout the building, the sacred and secular mix, as religious icons appear alongside corporate logos. One such icon is a prominently placed statue of Jesus, complete with a lasso. When Lisa skeptically asks about it, Homer replies that Jesus looks like a cowboy "because he's all man." Disgusted, Lisa leaves the church, embracing Buddhism through the help of Richard Gere, playing a caricature of himself. By the end of the episode she realizes that leaving Christianity means leaving Christmas, which means leaving presents. The siren call lures her back.

Escaping consumer culture indeed is tricky business. Materialism, since the time the golden calf hopped out of the fire for the Israelites in the wilderness, seduces and draws us in. The seduction becomes all the more entangling when these commodities and products, their makers tell us, aid in the task of evangelizing. Why wouldn't you buy the T-shirt, bumper sticker or wall plaque if, as an added bonus, someone might come to Christ because of your bold and unashamed witness? In a culture with such pressures, commodifying Christ becomes all too easy. Equally, such selling of Jesus becomes all too problematic, if not lethal, for the church and the gospel. The truth is, to many in the watching world, consumer Christianity is sacrilegious, not to mention that it just plain looks silly, which is precisely the lesson taught in this parable of *The Simpson's* episode. This chapter explores this world of consumer Christianity, asking what it all means for evangelical Christology.

VALUES ORIENTED

Again Juliet Schor describes our consumer culture: "There are more than 46,000 shopping centers in the country, a nearly two-thirds increase since 1986. Despite fewer people per household, the size of houses continues to

expand rapidly, with new construction featuring walk-in-closets and three- and four-car garages to store record quantities of stuff.” She also notes the increase in TV viewing, which has “resulted in historically unprecedented exposure to commercials. And ads have proliferated far beyond the television screen to virtually every social institution and type of public space.” Schor’s book is primarily aimed at consumer culture’s focus on children. Alarmed at the “commercialization of childhood,” she sets out to assess “the impact of a new consumer environment as a whole” on children. Christians in the marketplace have always seemed to know what Schor so carefully studied, that children are a powerful market. Big Idea’s VeggieTales might just provide a salient example.⁴

Hillary Warren’s study of VeggieTales reveals how the “all-encompassing media and peripheral product universe” have led to Big Idea’s outgrowing the niche of Christian retail to catch the eyes and aisle space of megaretailers Wal-Mart, Target and Sears. These markets, however, have their own sorts of demands on the products; they, in fact, “shape the message.” Warren notes that such markets as Wal-Mart are bent solely on maximizing profits, which only come about by stocking products that have wide appeal, leading to the corollary that “Developers of more exclusively constructed merchandise intended to challenge the majority culture or to spur the evangelical to action may not find a home for their product on the shelves if it is seen as potentially offensive, or worse, as a poor seller.” Admittedly, all publishers and media companies face the realities of market forces, and most authors and producers would like to see their work well-received. But something transformative occurs when market forces take precedence. And that transformation, sociologists like Schor and Warren, not to mention the likes of Neil Postman, have pointed out, is for ill. Warren relates her own personal experience, likening her son’s attraction to VeggieTales characters Bob and Larry to Elmo: “he loves Elmo but has no actual interest in anything Elmo says or does . . . and Bob and Larry are loved for being Bob and Larry, not because they tell Bible Stories.” She also concludes, based on consumer reviews and promotional materials, that parents buy VeggieTales products because they are fun and, in

⁴Schor, *Born to Buy*, pp. 9, 14, 215. Schor’s study found that this new consumer environment is one of the most significant social factors in children’s development. She also concludes that this pervasive consumer culture damages the moral and psychological well-being of children and of the families in which they live.

accord with the new value in the post 9/11 world, they are safe.⁵

VeggieTales products do not come in two lines, one for the Christian and one for the secular marketplace, which is to say that secular viewers and buyers are merely getting a values-oriented product as are Christian viewers and buyers. As these children consumers become adult consumers, their expectations of the market will likely be already shaped, and the market will likely not disappoint their tastes. This calls to mind the words of the curmudgeonly H. L. Mencken, "Religion, if it is to retain any genuine significance, can never be reduced to a series of sweet attitudes, possible to anyone not actually in jail for felony."⁶

How ironic it would be if American evangelicalism reduces its message to such a saccharin-sweet package, not to keep up with religious pluralism or because of some philosophical or theological shift but merely because it falls victim to its own commercial success. The gospel runs deeper than a values-oriented message. In fact, a values-oriented message trivializes the most profound and significant message of all time. Chapter seven references a quote in the *New Republic* concerning how the confiscation of Christ for political ends can only serve to trivialize him. It is equally true that the commodification of Christ also only serves to trivialize him. A salient example of this is a line of products aimed at the kid in all of us: Precious Moments.

BUDDY CHRIST

Samuel Butcher ranks as one of America's most successful artists. He turned his drawings of teardrop-eyed children into a virtual industry of inspirational porcelain figurines, stationery, posters and other paraphernalia that comprises the Precious Moments empire. After art school in Berkeley, California, Sam began his career at Child Evangelism Fellowship, first in the shipping department and then moving up to the art department. The teardrop-eyed children first filled posters and drawings for friends and family, then they appeared on the children's show *Tree Top House*. In the 1970s, again when Christian retailing was taking off, Sam joined forces with a partner, Bill Biel.

⁵Hillary Warren, *There's Never Been a Show Like Veggie Tales: Sacred Messages in a Secular Market* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 95-96, 110. For Neil Postman, see his chapter "Shuffle Off to Bethlehem," in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: Penguin, 2005).

⁶H. L. Mencken cited in Darryl Hart, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), p. 15.

They took Sam's artwork, at the time filling stationery and greeting cards, to the CBA trade show. The rest is history. In 1978 the first Precious Moments figurine came off the production line. Next came Bibles, "Precious Moments for Little Hands" and "Precious Moments Collectors" Bibles, in all colors and styles. But it wasn't until 1989 that Sam's true dream came true, when the Precious Moments Chapel in Carthage, Missouri, opened to the public. The Precious Moments Inspiration Park, in addition to the chapel, includes a visitor's center, complete with a massive gift shop and a buffet restaurant, with grounds replete with life-size statues of Precious Moments characters.

The chapel features paintings of various biblical scenes, with angels as characters, inspired by Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. The only adult in any of the images is Christ, prominently featured in the mural Hallelujah Square, a mural that also features Timmy Angel welcoming dead children, as angels, into heaven, as they ride cars and play. Michael Horton once visited the chapel, which he describes as "part Spanish-baroque, part Anaheim-funeral parlor." Horton, like many pilgrims to the Precious Moments chapel, experienced an epiphany, though Horton's might be unique among Precious Moments pilgrims. He puts it this way, "I had my own precious moment, an epiphany. . . . Like the exaggerated features of the Precious Moment Angels—calculated to evoke particular emotions of intimacy and sweetness—popular American religion in general has become increasingly captive to false gods." Harsh words for such inspirational images. Yet Horton argues rather persuasively that Precious Moments represents a "cult of sentimentality" that eschews real worship. He likens it to Aaron and the golden calf. Horton then intones, "It was not that Aaron was willing to have Israel worship a false God, but that he was willing to let them worship the true God falsely." Horton further makes his case by noting the irony that all of the angels at the chapel, as well as those substantiated as porcelain figurines, are cuddly, cute, winsome, tepid. "One would be hard-pressed to have Michael the Archangel in mind when gazing on one of these benign figurines," writes Horton. And why was Mary "filled with terror" when angels appeared to her, Horton asks. It's not just angels that come under this purview. So does Christ.⁷

Collectors of Precious Moments could have any number of figurines with

⁷Michael Horton, "Precious Moments in American Religion," *Modern Reformation*, January-February, 1997.

Precious Jesus figures. These include “Jesus Is the Answer,” “Jesus Is Coming Soon,” “Jesus Is the Light,” not to mention a host of figures related to nativity scenes. As with the angels on the rest of the statues, Precious Jesuses are cute and cuddly, looking a lot like orphans, only chubby. And they are always portrayed as children. Those who find Precious Moments figurines, well, precious, will take issue with the interpretation offered here. They might even find an ally in Timothy K. Beal. He recalls his visit to Precious Moments Inspiration Park in his book *Roadside Religion*, a travelogue of American religious attractions. What struck Beal most was the suffering and pain and loss that the pastel paints and cute expressions gloss over. Beal refers to various Precious Moments figurines that deal with loss and death, such as the figurine of a fireman (as a child) holding a baby wrapped in a blanket, a memorial to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. At the chapel, this pain may be seen in the room designed as a memorial to Sam Butcher’s twenty-seven-year-old son, Philip, who was killed by a drunk driver. Yet even consenting to this realization of suffering beneath the surface of the cute expressions, Beal concedes that in the end, Precious Moments idealizes faith and childhood, not to mention that it thrives on healthy doses of commercialism. On one level it may be comforting to relate to a Jesus somehow stuck in a time warp of infancy and childhood. But that child grew up. He is also the Lord of the universe—a message that somehow gets lost in the personalized, sentimentalized and trivialized Precious Jesus.⁸

Such trivializing of Jesus by presumably sincere people has sparked a rash of products that step beyond the trivial and verge closely into blasphemy, which might be a good description of some of the products of the good-humored folks at Accoutrements. They market the “Jesus Action Figure.” The deluxe model comes with loaves, fishes, a jug to turn water into wine and “glow-in-the-dark miracle hands.” Additionally, Accoutrements sells a Jesus bobblehead, which they call a nodder. They also sell “Jesus Pencil Toppers,” which come five to a package. I keep a set in my office at the college. It amazes me how many ask if they are erasers. Imagine? I am equally amazed at how many ask where they can get their own set. The move to blasphemy becomes complete at Jay and Silent Bob’s website, where the

⁸Timothy K. Beal, *Roadside Religion: In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), pp. 155-58.

“Buddy Christ Dashboard Statue” is sold. This figure has a smiling Jesus with hands at ten and two o’clock, pointing at the viewer and giving a thumbs up. The figure is inspired by Kevin Smith’s film *Dogma*. Forget the girl in the hula skirt, this figurine can be yours for \$14.95. While intended as a spoof, sincere Christians purchase it just the same. There may be a case to be made that for the sincere all things are sincere. But something, in the immortal words of Shakespeare’s Prince Hamlet, does not quite smell right in Denmark. American evangelicals, it seems, have a hard time recognizing the comic caricature that they have become. More tragic, American evangelicals have allowed Christ to become a comic caricature. And even more tragic still, American evangelicals can’t even seem to realize that Christ has become a comic caricature.⁹

A scholarly article in *Culture and Religion* explores this line of merchandise, specifically analyzing Buddy Christ and the Jesus Action Figure, “which seem intended as postmodern antichrists to offend Christian sensibilities and mock the image of Christ.” The article’s author, Steve Nolan, however, looks beyond the surface, seeing these artifacts as reflecting “a residual respect for Christ as a spiritual guide.” The sentiments expressed in these action and dashboard figures are not mocking Christ per se, as much as they mock “religious hypocrisy” and particular camps within the Christian establishment, such as the religious right—presumably included in this particular article because they are always an easy target. Hence the real sentiments of the manufacturers of these products and, I assume, the consumers who buy them, is to rescue Jesus the spiritual guide from the Jesus of religion. Nolan contends that it would be wrong “to superficially regard *Buddy Christ* or *Jesus Christ Action Figure* as irreverent parodies.” Instead, there is a “juxtaposition of the reverential with the subversive.” These action figures, Nolan argues, provide a means to reclaim Jesus for the masses from the institutional church’s lock on him. Of course, to free Jesus in this way is to also free him from the confines of the Gospels and the biblical text. Indeed, this liberated Jesus becomes a buddy, a sort of spiritual guru to lead one along life’s path. This exigent life in the modern world, es-

⁹“Jesus Action Figure,” Accoutrements.com <www.accoutrements.com/products/11537.html>, and “Jesus Pencil Toppers,” Accoutrements.com <www.accoutrements.com/products/11543.html>. “Buddy Christ Dashboard Statue,” JayandSilentBob.com <jayandsilentbob.com/budchrisdass1.html>.

pecially given the complexities of this new millennium, however, cries out for such a guru. Fortunately, some have come to our rescue.¹⁰

JESUS THE BUSINESSMAN

It may be recalled from chapter four that Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* portrayed Jesus as "the founder of modern business" and an advertising guru. Entrepreneurs of the 2000s can now turn to Laurie Beth Jones. In the introduction to her book *Jesus, Entrepreneur*, previously published as *Jesus, Inc.*, she insightfully muses, "Let's look for a moment at Jesus of Nazareth. He had a good job. A solid job. He had taken over his father's business after his death, and he enjoyed what he did." Based on these insights, Laurie Beth Jones poses as the consultant to an ever-expanding world of spiritually minded entrepreneurs, whom she terms "spiritreneurs." In this book, she transforms Jesus into a model businessman and the Gospels into a textbook for spiritreneurship 101. Consider her take on the episode of paying taxes from the Gospels:

In the sudden rush of customer demand, a small matter of paying Jesus' taxes was overlooked. Matthew, who had been a tax collector before he became a spiritreneur, knew how serious an offense that was. Yet Jesus simply told his team to go get the money from his offshore account—which at the time consisted of a coin in a fish's mouth.¹¹

Of course, Jones is attempting a humorous, catchy read of the text. She's also, however, appropriating a reading that subjects the text to contemporary sensibilities, framed in what matters to her, the language of American corporate culture. Such reading of the biblical text continues on through her other books, *Jesus, CEO* and *Jesus in Blue Jeans*. Keeping up with marketplace terminology and cognizant that CEOs recently have fallen on hard times, Jones also published *Jesus, Life Coach: Learn from the Best*. In *Jesus, Life Coach* she plays off of Jesus's words in John 21:6: "Cast the net on the right side of the boat," to offer the advice to "swim upstream." She then turns to the example of Sam Walton, Wal-Mart's famous founder who "swam upstream" by

¹⁰Steve Nolan, "Buddy Christ and Jesus Action Figure, Contemporary (Ab)use of the Christ Image(?): Thoughts on the Political Meanings of Two Postmodern Anti-Christis," *Religion and Culture* 7, no. 3 (2006): 311-27.

¹¹Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, Entrepreneur: Using Ancient Wisdom to Launch and Live Your Dreams* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), pp. xiv-xv.

founding retail centers in rural areas. Since I live in a rural area and have lived through a couple of lost battles on behalf of locals to keep Wal-Marts out, I was especially intrigued at how Sam Walton functions not only positively in her scheme but also as a model disciple of Christ. She seems to be impressed, however, only with the 3,400-plus stores his company has established and with its status as “the largest corporation in America.”¹²

Laurie Beth Jones’s *Jesus in Blue Jeans* also met a market niche, coming out as it did during a downsizing and simplifying trend of the late 1990s once the excesses of the 1980s caught up. In this book too she brings Jesus right into the world of the twentieth century. Using the text of John 15:16, “You did not choose me but I have chosen you and *appointed you* to do great works,” she remarks that Jesus honors appointments. She then makes the application, “Yet too many of us fail to keep even simple appointments. We show up late or not at all.” Drawing from the fact that “Jesus conducted his first miracle at a wedding,” she concludes that “Jesus was *event oriented*.” She adds that she herself, “as an advertising specialist . . . was trained early on to recognize the outreach value of ‘events.’” Consequently, her advice to entrepreneurs launching a new business consists of following Jesus by hosting an event. He was, after all, “event oriented.”¹³

This string of examples and the book titles themselves illustrate the malleability of Jesus in conforming to ever-shifting trends. To a world infatuated with and envious of CEOs, Jesus becomes the model CEO. For a more casual, downsized climate he becomes Jesus in blue jeans, the symbol of comfort. And in a world where the newly labeled “life coach” is much sought-after, Jesus can become that too. Yet all of these come at a cost of stretching, if not distorting, the biblical text and the true mission of Jesus as the God-man on Earth. I wonder if such book titles aren’t merely pandering to consumer tastes. To put the matter more directly, at what point do catchy titles, selling books and packing out seminars notwithstanding, do an injustice to the second person of the Trinity? Portraying Jesus as the model businessman or “spiritreneur” moves beyond the selling of the gospel or the selling of Christianity. It’s the selling of Jesus himself.

¹²Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, Life Coach: Learn from the Best* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), p. 199.

¹³Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus in Blue Jeans: A Practical Guide to Everyday Spirituality* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), pp. 261, 272.

There are also ample cases of using Jesus to sell, or at least the use of one's commitment to Jesus to sell. For those Christians nervous about allowing a secular plumber into their house, there's *The Shepherd's Guide: The Christians' Choice of Yellow Pages*, hailed by its publisher as "America's Premier Christian Business Directory." Christians in the area where I live may avail themselves of the South Central Pennsylvania edition, while other regions have their own editions. Travelers and the peripatetic may take advantage of the national online directory. Such directories advertise for Christian bus and travel tours, Christian book and gift stores, ministries, churches, and Christian camps and conference centers. But these directories also offer so much more, such as Christian lawyers, insurance agents, dentists, engineers, auto mechanics and plumbers. As for Christian lawyers, one law firm includes a biblical verse in their ad: "Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Prov 11:14 KJV). An electrical contractor uses Genesis 1:3-4, "And God said, Let there be light. . . . And God saw the light, that it was good" (KJV). Christian insurance agents appeal to our desire to be good stewards. If you happen to need a mortgage, you're likely safe in the hands of the "Dedicated Christian Servants" at Covenant Mortgage & Investment. For those needing some pampering, A Heavenly Touch offers hair and nail services, massage and electrolysis. Why not, as the ad invites, "Treat Yourself to a Christian Oasis"?¹⁴

Bible verses and original Christian artwork, as well as two plans of salvation and a Christian business person's credo, intermingle with the ads. The ads themselves are peppered with symbols of the cross and, of course, the ubiquitous fish. In addition, the reader also sees a number of American flags splashed on the pages. Patriotism, piety and products all coalesce, providing convenience for Christian consumers, the perfect convergence of Christ and commerce. As with many of the cases in this chapter, no doubt many of the advertisers in *The Shepherd's Guide* are sincere in both their faith and their business. In the process, however, the cross, the place on which the God-man suffered and died for us and for our salvation, is reduced to an advertising logo.

The Shepherd's Guide also reveals the discomfort many Christians have in living in the world, or the confusion they have over the sacred and the secular. In fact, many of the examples used in this book highlight this problem. It's not

¹⁴*The Shepherd's Guide: South Central Pennsylvania*, spring 2005-spring 2006, pp. 2, 9, 47, 65, 45.

enough to be a plumber who happens to be a Christian. One has to be a Christian plumber. Musicians and artists, and even writers and scholars, face this problem acutely. Being a *Christian* musician legitimizes the musical product and the musician. Evangelism has a totalizing effect on one's work. It's not kingdom work to be a good steward as an electrical engineer as much as if you witness while you work. *The Shepherd's Guide* ironically, however, dulls the edge to such a Christian witness, since it primarily serves the Christian community. *The Shepherd's Guide*, not to mention CCM and even the union of Christian insurance agents, creates an insular world for Christians. By simply sticking with the businesses in the book, you can keep yourself and your family safe from the tentacles of non-Christians. And when all these Christian plumbers come calling they find that they're witnessing to the already evangelized. They're plumbing, so to speak, for the choir. Some of these juxtapositions of Christian symbols with business can also be downright strange, such as the symbol of a cross and an empty tomb emblazoned on a sign for a septic service.

In his 1922 work *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis used the phrase *Christianity Incorporated* to capture the ethos of his fictional small town overrun by a blending of consumerism and religion. Lewis could find easy fodder for his book in the writings of the likes of Barton, who rather brazenly brought business into Christianity. What was good for 1922, however, may be good for today. Recently, Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow have used Lewis's phrase as the title for their exposé of the church's unholy matrimony with consumer and capitalist culture, a church full of those more schooled on Adam Smith, they quip, than the Sermon on the Mount. Whether taking Jesus as everybody's favorite CEO for book titles or whether using the cross for advertising logos, the co-opting of Christ for business hijacks the Gospels and Christ himself. Capitalist and consumerist culture becomes the context into which the gospel is made to fit, into which Christ conforms, rather than the reverse.¹⁵

GOLFING FOR JESUS

Of course, those engaged in such activities will contest my conclusions, opting instead to see such activities as geared toward evangelism or toward bring-

¹⁵Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow, *Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business Is Buying the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), p. 177.

ing one's Christian faith to bear upon daily life in the marketplace. Church historian Sean Lucas likes to recall an incident from his days clerking in a Christian bookstore while in high school. A customer came into the store to purchase a fish sticker for her new car. When he told her that they were currently out of stock, she exclaimed in a great deal of exasperation and even a little bit of anger, "How am I going to witness?"

The extent of my golfing consists of hitting a few golf balls around in the back yard, using a used set of golf clubs purchased at a yard sale for ten dollars. I was, nevertheless, once invited to speak at an evangelistic golf outing where the foursome plays from the best-positioned ball. I was told by the host that my not being a golfer wouldn't be a problem since it was a best-ball tournament. This was quite fortunate for me, since the balls I hit ended up in the river, the ponds, nearby fields and all manner of woods. I soon exhausted my supply. One of the foursome, long on patience and well-stocked with golf balls, came to my aid. He handed over his favorite golf balls for such golfers as I, witnessing golf balls, embossed with a fish advising to read John 3:16-17 and a copyrighted saying, "I once was lost, but now am found"—words I thought to be written some time ago by John Newton. Use these, he told me, that way when you lose them someone might find them and get saved.

The Holy Spirit is indeed omnipotent, omniscient and endlessly resourceful, which is to say perhaps he does use fish bumper stickers and witnessing golf balls. It just seems that doing such things isn't quite on par, pardon the pun, with following the Great Commission and being committed to evangelize. But don't tell that to the makers of "The Power of the Christ" T-shirts. They fuse the universal symbol for power, an incomplete circle with a line at the top, with the symbol of the cross, cleverly arriving at the "power of the cross." Not only does the wearer get a "nice power surge by thinking of Jesus Christ" but those passersby will also be exposed to such power. This is, the designers of this particular line of Christian apparel tell us, "The Future Fashion of Faith." Christian T-shirts, while having an apparently bright future, also have a past. Coming in vogue in the 1970s, Colleen McDannell attributes their ascendancy, along with the rest of Christian retailing, to the Jesus movement. An advertisement for Christian T-shirts by The Idea Machine, self-described as "The T-Shirt People," in the May 1978 edition of *Bookstore Journal*, ran the heading, "If It's Worth Sharing, It's Worth Wearing." Folks were

turned on to Jesus and ready to wear their faith on their sleeves, literally.¹⁶

One of the favorite themes of Christian T-shirt designers is, of course, Jesus, as in images of Jesus, sayings of Jesus and, perhaps the all-time favorite, manipulations of Jesus's image or name or biblical titles as a knockoff of well-established logos and advertising jingles. The supreme example of the latter is using "Jesus Christ" in the Coca-Cola script with a slight twist on the world renowned slogan "He's the Real Thing." Recent additions in this genre include "Got Jesus?" playing off the milk campaign, "Jesus Inside," playing off of the logo that alerts computer users that Intel is inside their computers, and the words "The Deal" over the horizontal bar of a cross while the word "Take" splashes across the vertical bar, playing off of the popular TV show *Deal or No Deal*. The particular company that makes these T-shirts proudly tells its customers to "Be a fisher of men," which in this case presumably means to purchase and wear their T-shirts. Jeffrey Wendland, publisher of the *Online Christian Shopper*, similarly advises would-be consumers. "Almost every vestige of Christianity has been stripped from the culture," he notes before adding, "But one place they can't strip it is off your back." In other words, a fool-proof way to fight America's anti-Christian culture is to wear Christian T-shirts (or sweatshirts and hoodies). By wearing these shirts Christians can reach millions—the average T-shirt apparently is seen by three thousand people in its lifetime. But not every situation allows for a T-shirt. "That's where Christian jewelry comes in," notes Wendland.¹⁷

John Kavanaugh raises a crucial question against such reasoning. He sees a rather stark contrast between what he broadly calls "consumer values" with "Christian values." Consumer values emphasize the "commodity form of life," which reduces people to things, minimizes personal communication and sees relationships as transactions. Kavanaugh further speaks of the commodity form of life creating an "empty interior," in which we lose our sense of our self and which leads to "broken relationships," with advertisements telling us that cars and clothes can do more for us than people. Such a dehumanized form of life results in the "degradation of justice" and a "flight from the wounded." This commodity form of life also affects more than our shopping. Kavanaugh

¹⁶See "The Power of the Christ," <ThePoweroftheChrist.com>, accessed on 12/21/2006. McDannell, *Material Christianity*, pp. 251-59.

¹⁷These shirts are all available at ChristianShirts.net, the website for "Christian and Pro-Life Apparel." Jeffrey Wendland, "Countering the Anti-Christian Culture," <ezinearticles.com>, March 11, 2007.

observes, “It affects the way we think and feel, the way we love and pray, the way we evaluate our enemies, the way we relate to our spouses and children. It is ‘systematic.’” Christian values, on the other hand, emphasize the “personal form of life,” which counters the commodity form in every way. This personal form finds its fullest revelation in Jesus Christ. The personal form of life also speaks to the deepest “identity, needs, and capacities of human nature.” Given how Kavanaugh frames it, capitulating to consumer culture as the means for evangelism means adapting to a commodity form of life, a form that seemingly runs counter to Christ’s rather personal call and commission of the original fishers of people. Commodifying evangelism turns persons who relate into customers who buy, a rather alien approach to that of Christ’s.¹⁸

Such apparel and trinkets do not merely impact evangelism but also the perception of Christ. Apart from knockoffs of logos and advertising jingles, Christian T-shirts tend to portray all manner of sayings and images of Jesus. These include T-shirts manufactured by the company Christian Gear, promoting itself as marketing “Fun. Hip. Christian Merchandise,” with such selections as “Rebel with a Cause,” and “Christian Outfitters: Jesus Christ, Tough as Nails.” You can get “Jesus Is My Homeboy” T-shirts from the company Teenage Millionaire, or you can purchase their companion offering “Mary Is My Homegirl.” Many of these T-shirts blend Christianity with patriotism, American patriotism that is. A rather popular design plays off the convenient yield of USA once the words *Jesus* and *saves* are combined: JesUSAves. One company even takes patriotism to levels of statehood, offering a T-shirt sporting the fish symbol filled with the Texas flag hovering over the words, “Proud to be a Christian from Texas.” In the wake of 9/11 and the war on terror, any assortment of T-shirts and posters combine, if not equate, Christianity with American patriotism. One such patriotic shirt design goes so far as to juxtapose a soldier’s helmet, an M16 with bayonet attached, and the cross of Christ, with the words, “Onward Christian Soldier.”

Reporting for the *Los Angeles Times*, Stephanie Simon recalls her visit to the 2006 International Christian Retailers Show. One new product caught her eye, or perhaps her nose:

Virtuous Woman perfume comes packaged with a passage from Proverbs. But

¹⁸John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), pp. 5-19, 51, 71.

what makes the floral fragrance distinctly Christian, Hobbs [the retailer] said, is that it's supposed to be a tool for evangelism. "It should be enticing enough to provoke questions: 'What's that you're wearing?'" Hobbs said. "Then you take the opportunity to speak of your faith. They've opened the door, and now they're going to get it."¹⁹

None of this hawking of all things Christian has escaped the eyes of a watching public. CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360°* ran a story introduced as "Faith for Sale," which explored "how companies use religion to sell their goods." *The Osgood File* on CBS radio network ran a story on "how faith based products are hot," though the underlying message was that "not everyone thinks that's so hot." Even bloggers get in on the action. Jesusoftheweek.com offers a platform for submissions for such commercialization of Christ as the Buddy Christ and Jesus Action Figure. This site may be offensive to most Christians as a mockery of Christ. But most of the submissions to the site are of products by Christians. And those products give non-Christians plenty to gawk at. Christian retailing has accomplished its goal of getting the word out: enlisting consumers to wear T-shirts and jewelry as fishers of people, and enlisting golfers to use witnessing golf balls. The message being heard, however, might not be the one intended. The true message of the cross, it seems, is getting lost in a sea of commerce. The commercials are too loud.²⁰

The threat of losing the gospel message even within the Christian community itself looms large given that this consumer culture is so freely embraced and participated in by evangelicals. Vincent J. Miller takes us one step further in analyzing the impact of consumer culture on the Christian message. He turns to Disney, which he wryly notes is "obligatory for anyone writing on religion and consumer culture." He dives beneath the typical criticism of Disney to make a significant point concerning the merchandising that dwarfs in sales the box office take of the movies, arguing, "This use of narrative to sell merchandise gives rise to the most profound cultural impact of Disney and other producers of commercial popular culture: the formation of our habits of interpretation and appropriation." "Children," having been conditioned in their habits of interpretation and appropriation,

¹⁹Stephanie Simon, "Christian Retailers Put Their Print on Products," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 2006.

²⁰Anderson Cooper, *Anderson Cooper 360°*, July 25, 2005; Charles Osgood, *The Osgood File*, March 9, 2005.

“learn to quickly accept narratives, to enjoy the roles and symbol systems of the stories, to locate themselves within the tales, and to consider their heroes, conflicts, and ideologies.” Then Miller adds, “While children are learning to do all of this, they are simultaneously learning to treat these narratives, roles, and symbols as disposable commodities: things to be played with, explored, tried on, and, in the end, discarded.” What concerns Miller the most is that while children are learning of the narratives of Disney, they’re also learning of the narrative of Jesus. In fact, more often than not, they’re learning both from the same DVD player, and their Christian-symbol emblazoned T-shirts are folded side by side with clothes of their favorite Disney characters in their closets and dressers.²¹

CONSUMPTION

Consumption was the term used in past centuries to refer to the disease today known as tuberculosis. It had been called “consumption” due to the way the tubercle bacillus or bacteria, lodged in the lungs, consumed the life of those fallen by the disease. Consumption, not in a bacterial but in a material form, continues to drain the life out of those caught in its grasp. Consumerism is parasitic, threatening our well-being. Colleen McDannell traces the beginnings of Christian retailing to Victorian days, noting that “Victorian domestic religion encouraged the production and use of religious objects.” Once let into the home, Christian marketing had its beginnings. Popular items included sentimental figurines and mottoes. McDannell spotlights David Sydney Warner’s *The Gospel Trumpet*, which was originally founded in 1881 as a newspaper but soon became a major producer and distributor of all sorts of Christian products. When the postcard craze hit America in the first decade of the 1900s, the *Gospel Trumpet* catalog from 1909 offered its customers no fewer than fifty choices. Later decades would see the addition of Scripture-embossed pencils, bookends and even “Spread-the-Light Reading Lamps.” The latter included “beautiful pictures of the Savior” and were billed as “The ‘Ideal’ Home Lamp[.] A Testimony of Your Christian Faith.” Other companies joined *The Gospel Trumpet* in making such Christian products available to an eager public through both catalogs and door-to-door sales, one of the most

²¹Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 5-6.

popular being the door-to-door Bible salesperson.²²

Post-World War II American buying habits trended away from door-to-door and even catalog sales, as neighborhoods began giving way to subdivisions, developments and the beginnings of suburban America. And to meet this new buying public, Christian retail stores began appearing. The Christian Booksellers Association, founded in 1950, came to the aid of these new stores. McDannell notes how such stores prospered modestly through the 1950s and 1960s, but in the 1970s the increase in annual revenue from these stores nearly doubled national retail averages. She credits this largely to the Jesus People movement, which with its emphasis on Christianity as a “lifestyle,” was anxious to read, hear and wear its faith. The 1970s saw blockbuster books like Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* and Ken Taylor’s paraphrase *The Living Bible*. Both dominated bestseller lists. Companies like World Wide Publications made stickers and buttons, replete with Jesus movement sayings and symbols, by the boxload in order to fill acrylic stands in the new bookstores. Shirts and jewelry, “holy hardware,” came next.

One of these jewelers, Bob Siemon, began his company in the 1970s. Turned off by the “kitsch” that passed as Christian merchandise, a Tuxedo-clad Bob Siemon appeared in his own advertisements touting the quality of his merchandise. These would be decorative clocks, watches, photo frames and even potpourri jars that one could be proud of, if not admire for their beauty and elegance. After McDannell published her book, however, the company Bob Siemon created moved from being a major force to a veritable institution by producing all manner of bracelets and other trinkets emblazoned with four letters, WWJD (What Would Jesus Do)? This ubiquitous four-letter question moves millions of pieces annually and extends beyond the reach of Bob Siemon designs. There are even WWJD? boxer shorts. Propelled by the success of his company’s WWJD? merchandise, Bob Siemon and Mel Gibson teamed up to launch a whole line of “Passion” merchandise. In the official press release, Siemon declares, “We distributed millions of WWJD? bracelets. . . . This is going to be so much bigger.” Billions, perhaps? The Passion line of products includes trading-card style “Witnessing Cards,”

²²McDannell, *Material Christianity*, p. 225. For her extended discussion of *The Gospel Trumpet*, see pp. 229-46. Spread-The-Light Reading Lamps were marketed in the *Gospel Trumpet’s* 1955 catalog, reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 258. I am indebted to McDannell, pp. 246-69, for the next few paragraphs.

which feature “images from the movie on the front and scriptures that explain the plan of salvation on the back” and the Nail, a 2 1/2-inch pewter pendant replica of the crucifixion nails. When the movie was in theaters, bookstores couldn’t keep these products in stock.²⁵

Dell deChant offers an explanation for the empty shelves when he speaks of the consumptive imperative. He notes, “Personal consumption becomes less of a socially constructed behavior and a much more elemental imperative.” The activity of consuming isn’t so much “conformity to social demands or even psychological motivations.” Instead, consumptive behavior “becomes a binding obligation.” Consumptive activities become “hard-wired, instinctual behaviors—ritual activities performed without reflection and without doubt.” We acquire and consume, in consumer culture, as automatons, induced by nothing more than a fifteen-second advertising spot. Saying “I have to have X,” comes as naturally as breathing. DeChant’s point is that this is the culture in which we live, which is to say this does affect us.²⁴

R. Laurence Moore, who has had a few less-than-savory things to say about Christian forays into politics and American history—he’s the coauthor of *The Godless Constitution*—also has some biting criticism of these forays into the marketplace. He wryly notes that, given the “fast, friendly, and guiltless consumption” of the American marketplace, “would-be religious prophets have to learn the ways of Disneyland in order to find their audience.” But the doing is their undoing, for these prophets will be so accommodated as to lose their prophetic voice. Moore wonders even how such prophets can speak to consumer culture, asking how these prophets can make consumers sold on Disneyland and McDonald’s “understand that when Adam and Eve broke a commandment against a forbidden consumption in the Garden of Eden, forbidden because it was needless, they were pointing humankind towards its final agony?” Moore answers his own question by lamenting, “Probably they cannot.” Christians so immersed in con-

²⁵“Bob Siemon Designs Helps Share Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion of the Christ,’” January 20, 2004, press release, signed by Dwight Robinson of Bob Siemon Designs. See also “The Passion,” *Bob Siemon Designs* <www.bobsiemon.com/bobsiemondesigns/default.aspx?DepartmentID=48&DepartmentIndex=58&CategoryID=158&CategoryIndex=0>. For the success of the campaign, see the Associated Press article, “Film Boosts Christian Merchandise: ‘The Passion of the Christ’ has Bookstores Scrambling to Keep Up,” March 1, 2004.

²⁴Dell deChant, *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), p. 94.

sumer culture and the wanton indulgence of needless consumption simply can't offer a remedy. In Moore's telling observation, Moore himself assumes the role of prophet for American evangelicals, who unwittingly, through their capitulation to consumer culture, vainly fall prey to consumption in the treating of those who are dying from it.²⁵

One particular episode of VeggieTales has Madame Blueberry acquiring so much stuff that her tree house eventually collapses. She has become a slave to her stuff, to the accumulation of things. She has forsaken people, her friends, in the process. She even almost loses herself to consumption—as the collapsing house nearly takes her life. The episode bravely proclaims a counter-consumer-culture message, bravely because “Stuff-Mart,” the almost hypnotically powerful source of all Madame Blueberry's stuff, functions as a rather obvious symbol of the megaretailer that stocks so much VeggieTales merchandise on its shelves. The creators of the episode were moving dangerously close to biting the hand that feeds them. But, alas, the counter-consumer-culture message gets muddled. After the episode concludes, the credits roll and the theme song reverberates from the speakers, commercials follow for VeggieTales stuff, all forms of the characters, sheets and pillow sets, more DVDs and sing-along CDs. More needless stuff, which all can be purchased at a “Stuff-Mart” near you. The prophetic voice of the episode loses a bit of its edge by being, in the end, too enmeshed in the culture against which it protests. Larry Moore might just be right.

CONCLUSION

Christian scholars and theologians rarely venture into the waters navigated in this chapter; they rarely offer a critique of Christian T-shirt websites. Yet it is precisely in these places that popular evangelical expression may be found. This is where evangelicals live. Further, more often than not, American evangelicals reflexively accept the tenets of consumer culture and adapt their faith and its expression to them. As American evangelicals we have been well-trained as consumers through countless acts of consumption. We have been taught to buy, and we're quick learners. We have come to view our faith as a commodity, and at times we make Christ into one too. It would be naive to

²⁵Moore, *Selling God*, p. 276. Moore makes a similar “prophetic observation” regarding American evangelicals and politics, as will be seen in chap. 8.

attempt escaping consumer culture altogether. Merely having an awareness of it will likely help. Ignoring consumer culture's impact on evangelicalism and our Christology, however, comes at a cost we cannot afford.

While it may be challenging for Christianity and for individual Christians to escape consumer culture, some responses may still be in order. Rodney Clapp once called for cynicism as the answer. I'm "often happy to be cynical," he said, "Not least because it seems that cynicism is the only faithful response to hypercommercialized Christianity." Such cynicism leads to action, the action of cultural resistance, the action of difference.²⁶

In the brief time between the publication of the hardback in 2004 and the paperback edition in 2005, Juliet Schor's book *Born to Buy* launched a veritable movement to decommercialize childhood. One wonders what it would take to launch a similar campaign to decommercialize Christ and the gospel. There is no doubt that the many marketing campaigns and product lines discussed in this chapter have been used to bring people to Christ and to strengthen faith. It also might pass without doubt that such marketing campaigns and product lines have injured Christ and the gospel. The televangelist scandals of the 1980s led to a public distaste for Christianity. Many onlookers had long suspected that the televangelists were exploiting the faith for their own financial windfall. Jim Bakker told audiences, "We have a better product than soap or automobiles. We have eternal life." The worldly wise among his audience knew that in Bakker's hands such a product wasn't being hawked for free. Once the scandals broke, such suspicions proved true. Many onlookers continue to harbor such suspicions of Christianity, finding all of this Christian kitsch, "holy hardware" and "Jesus junk" to be the mere exploitation of Christianity. Those outside of Christianity are readily cynical of such Christian endeavors.²⁷

Even Billy Graham, while free from financial scandal, still expressed his work in evangelism as selling the gospel. In his autobiography he recalls the time, as an eighteen-year-old, going door to door taking orders for Fuller brushes. He was motivated, because he believed in the product. Every home

²⁶Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 13. See also his chapters on Christianity and consumerism in *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000).

²⁷Schor, *Born to Buy*, p. 213. Jim Bakker, cited in Ben Armstrong, *The Electric Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), p. 175.

should have a Fuller brush he would tell himself as he marched along. He, by his own accounts, learned many things from those days of selling Fuller brushes when he would later turn his attention to the greatest product, the gospel and eternal life.²⁸

In light of these appropriations of consumer culture, perhaps we need cynical responses from within the Christian community too, such cynical responses that refuse to be indifferent to the adaptation of market forces and consumer practices in the task of making disciples. We need, hearkening back to John Cavanaugh's categories, to drive our discipleship deep in the personal form of life, eschewing the commodity form of life. To embrace the commodity form, even in the name of evangelizing, exploits the faith and abdicates our calling.

Such cultural resistance is not easy. Benjamin R. Barber speaks of the difficulty, if not near impossibility, of escaping the totalizing and insistent consumptive cultural ethos, which he refers to as the "McWorld" we all live in. Barber is speaking to American culture in general, not the church. He proceeds, however, to think of a solution, "the only road of resistance," which he finds to be "dogmatic religious critiques" of the "McWorld" culture. He even speaks specifically of "Christian resisters," those who are skeptical of consumer culture and consequently avoid getting entangled in it. Barber may be on to something. Charles A. McDaniel in *God and Money* spends a great deal of time castigating the church for its assumptive adaptation of capitalist structures. At one point he indicts the church for its growing consensus of conformity to market ethics and market practices, claiming, "It's not capitalism per se but rather the intensely individualistic and rationalistic character of modern capitalism that threatens Christianity's moral system and its conception of the person." He not only tears down, he also seeks to build up by pointing to an alternative, what McDaniel calls a "redemptive economy." David Fitch also speaks of "redeemed economics," which requires a "Christian community to be *in* but not *of* the world." Katherine Turpin similarly speaks of the church as a community providing a "lifelong or ongoing conversion" that helps "branded" adolescents escape from "the dominant life script provided by their consumerist context." A decade earlier Jim Wallis spoke of "commu-

²⁸Billy Graham, *Just as I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 57-58. It's interesting to compare this testimony of his with 2 Corinthians 2:17.

nity economics,” cutting against Western capitalism and “market economics,” which have damaged individuals, people groups and races, and the environment. In other words, it’s quite noble for individual Christians to live as strangers and aliens, cultural resisters in consumer culture. It’s another thing altogether for the church to take on the larger task of asking how it can respond to consumer culture and its dehumanizing and oppressive effects on both people and ecology. A very large task and a difficult one to be sure. But one that is worth some attention nevertheless.²⁹

The commodification of Christianity not only exploits and subjects the faith to the cultural form of consumer capitalism, but it also sentimentalizes and trivializes faith. In “Inspirations: A Celebration of Faith,” a catalog aimed at a Christian market by the Oriental Trading Company, parents, Christian school teachers and Sunday school teachers can avail themselves of all sorts of products for Christmas, home décor, and gifts for the whole year. On page 14 of the Holiday 2006 edition of the catalog, among the “affordable and inspirational gifts,” would-be buyers could even treat themselves to “Vinyl Nativity Rubber Duckies.” At \$5.95 a dozen, who wouldn’t want rubber ducky versions of Joseph, Mary, baby Jesus and the rest of the nativity cast? This is taking the doctrine of the incarnation to an all-time low.

One of the chapters in Timothy Beal’s *Roadside Religion* recalls his family trip to Golgotha Fun Park in Cave City, Kentucky, and Biblical Mini Golf in Lexington. Golgotha Fun Park is a miniature golf course of eighteen holes that tell the biblical tale that runs from creation to resurrection. Beal, however, couldn’t get over the cognitive dissonance caused by the name, “Golgotha Fun Park.” The word *Golgotha* literally means the place of the skull. As Beal intones, it “doesn’t exactly go with ‘fun.’” The miniature golf at Lexington Ice Center and Sports Complex, however, sports fifty-four holes, with one course devoted to the Old Testament, one to the New and one to miracles. Beal finds further cognitive dissonance in the bringing together of the pro-

²⁹Benjamin R. Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: Norton, 2007), pp. 259, 204; Charles A. McDaniel, *God & Money: The Moral Challenge of Capitalism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 310; David F. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), pp. 153-79; Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), pp. 72-76; and Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics: Beyond “Religious Right” and “Secular Left”* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1995), pp. 197-209.

found and the trivial, observing, "With biblical mini-golf, then, the sacred narrative, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, meets one of the most trivial of all American amusements." He illustrates his point with a run-down of these biblical mini-golf courses, "Here biblical narrative is reduced to a series of green-carpeted putting greens with Noah instead of Tom Thumb, a burning bush instead of a windmill, and an empty tomb instead of a bottomless hole." This leaves Beal to make a final, rather compelling, observation and to ask some final, rather urgent questions: "American evangelical Christianity . . . tends to be the most liberal of Christianities when it comes to its appropriating and adapting tradition to the popular interests and consumer demands of the secular mainstream. . . . What keeps it from becoming a complete carnivalization of tradition? Does it ultimately sacrifice the sacred, so to speak, in the name of spreading its Gospel?" Beal leaves these questions unanswered.⁵⁰

American evangelicals, immersed in consumer culture, rarely even ask such questions. The spreading of the gospel at all costs, literally at times, trumps any such self-reflection and self-criticism that questions like Beal's raise. American evangelicals, however, should be asking such questions. They also need, unlike Beal, to offer answers. In those answers we may find that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, doesn't belong as a vinyl rubber ducky, and neither does he belong on a bracelet.

⁵⁰Beale, *Roadside Religion*, pp. 72, 76, 84, 87.