The Empty Self

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland claims that Christians are not experiencing spiritual maturity because they are victims of something he calls the Empty-Self Syndrome. Don Closson examines his analysis and offers ways for Christians to avoid its influence.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Christian philosopher Dr. J. P. Moreland is a man with a mission. He claims that Christians are not experiencing spiritual maturity because they are victims of something he calls the "Empty-Self Syndrome."{1} This lack of maturity leaves believers without the necessary tools to impact their culture for God's kingdom or to experience what the Bible calls the "mind of Christ." According to Moreland, the purpose of life for believers is to bring honor to God. This involves finding one's vocation and pursuing it for the good of both believers and non-believers, while in the process, being changed into a more Christ-like person. Doing this well involves developing intellectual and moral virtues over long periods of time and delaying the constant desire for immediate gratification.

Unfortunately, our culture teaches an entirely different set of virtues. It emphasizes a self-centered, consumption-oriented lifestyle, which works directly against possessing a mature Christian mind. It also places an unhealthy emphasis on living within the moment, rather than committing to long-term projects of personal discipline and learning.

To better understand his argument it helps to explain the concept of necessary and sufficient causes. A necessary cause for Christian maturity is salvation. For without the new birth, a person is still spiritually dead and devoid of the benefits of the indwelling Holy Spirit. However, although

forgiveness of sin is necessary for Christian maturity, it is not sufficient. We cooperate with the Spirit to reach maturity by disciplining our will and intellect in the virtues outlined in the New Testament.

Writing to Titus, the apostle Paul said that a leader in the church should be "self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."{2} This admonition assumes a number of complex skills and a life of dedication to learning and teaching. Our leaders must be knowledgeable of the Scriptures, but they must also be able to defend the Christian worldview in the marketplace of ideas common to our culture. The ability to give a response to those opposed to Christianity, and to do so with gentleness and respect, as Peter teaches (1 Peter 3:15), requires a confidence that comes with a life of devotion and study. Herbert Schlossberg writes:

> In their uncompromising determination to proclaim truth, Christians must avoid the intellectual flabbiness of the larger society. They must rally against the prevailing distrust of reason and the exaltation of the irrational. Emotional self-indulgence and irrationalities have always been the enemies of the gospel, and the apostles warned their followers against them.{3}

In this article we will consider Moreland's description of the empty-self syndrome and offer ways for Christians to avoid its influence.

Seven Traits of the Empty-Self

We are discussing a set of hindrances to Christian maturity called the "Empty-Self Syndrome." J.P Moreland, in his book *Love Your God With All Your Mind,* lists seven traits common to people who suffer from this self-inflicted malady. To some, it might appear that Moreland is describing a typical teenager

and, in a sense, the analogy fits. The *empty-self* is best summarized by a lack of growth, both intellectually and spiritually, resulting in perpetual Christian adolescence.

Inordinate Individualism

The first trait of the empty-self is *inordinate individualism*. Those afflicted rarely define themselves as part of a community, or see their lives in the context of a larger group. This sense of rugged individualism is part of the American tradition and has been magnified with the increased mobility of the last century. People rarely feel a strong attachment or commitment even to family members. The empty-self derives life goals and values from within their own set of personal needs and perceptions, allowing self-centeredness to reign supreme. Rarely does the empty-self seek the good of a broader community, such as the church, when deciding on a course of action.

Infantilism

Many observers of American culture note that adolescent personality traits are staying with young people well into what used to be considered adulthood. Stretching out a four-year college degree to five or six years and delaying marriage into the thirties are signs that commitment and hard work are not highly valued. Some go even further, seeing an *infantile demand for pleasure* pervading all of our culture. The result is that boredom becomes the greatest evil. We are literally entertaining ourselves to death with too much food, too little exercise, and little to live for beyond personal pleasure.

Narcissism

The empty-self is also *highly narcissistic*. Narcissism is a keenly developed sense of self-infatuation; as a result, personal fulfillment becomes the ultimate goal of life. It also can result in the manipulation of relationships in order to feed this sense. In its most dangerous form, one’s

relationship with God can be shaped by this need. God is dethroned in order to fit the individual's quest for self-actualization. This condition leaves people with the inability to make long-standing commitments and leads to superficiality and aloofness. Education and church participation are evaluated on the basis of personal fulfillment. They are not viewed as opportunities to use one's gifts for the good of others.

All of us are guilty of these attitudes occasionally. Christian growth is the process of peeling away layers of self-centered desires. The situation becomes serious when both the culture and the church affirm a self-centered orientation, rather than a God-centered one.

According to Moreland, the couch potato is the poster child for the empty-self. Rather than equipping oneself with the tools necessary to impact the culture for Christ and His kingdom, many people choose to live vicariously through the lives and actions of others. Moreland writes, " . . . the pastor studies the Bible for us, the news media does our political thinking for us, and we let our favorite sports team exercise, struggle, and win for us."{4}

Passivity

The words we use to describe our free time support this notion of *passivity*. What was once referred to as a holiday or originally a holy day has become a vacation; what used to be a special time of proactive celebration has become a time for vacating. The goal seems to remain in a passive state while someone else is paid to amuse you.

One of the most powerful factors contributing to this passivity is the television. Watching TV encourages a passive stance towards life. Its very popularity is built upon the vicarious experiences it offers, from sports teams to soap operas. It is hard to imagine how a person who watches an

average amount of TV, which is twenty five hours a week for elementary students, could have enough time left over to invest in the reading and study required to become a mature believer and defender of the faith. Our celebrity-centered culture encourages us to focus on the lives of a popular few rather than live our own lives to the fullest for God.

Sensate Culture

It follows naturally that the empty-self syndrome encourages the belief that the physical, sense-perceptible world is all that there is. Although Christians, by definition, should be immune from this attitude, they often act as if it were true. The resulting *sensate* culture loses interest in arguments for transcendent truth or in ideas like the soul, and the consequence is a closing of the mind, as described by Allen Bloom in his best-selling book on university life in the late 1980s.{5} Students and the general public lose hope in the possibility that truth can be found in books, so they stop reading; or at least stop reading serious books about worldview issues. Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sarokin wrote that once a sensate culture takes over, a society has already begun to disintegrate due to the lack of intellectual resources necessary to maintain a viable community.{6}

Paul reminds us of the danger of the empty-self state of mind when he writes, "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. . . ."{7}

No Interior Life

Moreland claims that in the last few decades people have become far more concerned about external factors such as the possession of consumer goods, celebrity status, image, and power rather than the development of what he calls an *interior*

life. It wasn't long ago that people were measured by the internal traits of virtue and morality, and it was the person who exhibited character and acted honorably who was held in high esteem. This kind of life was built upon contemplation of what might be called the "good life." After long deliberation, an individual then disciplined himself in those virtues most valued. Peter describes such a process for believers when he tells us to "add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love."{8} He adds that "if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."{9} The Christian life begins with faith, but grows by feeding the interior life in a disciplined manner.

Busy-ness

Almost everyone experiences the last trait of the empty-self to some degree: the hurried, *overly busy life*. Although most of us wouldn't think of it this way, busy-ness can actually be a form of idolatry. Anything that stands between a person and their relationship with God becomes an idol. As Richard Keyes puts it:

> Idolatry may not involve explicit denials of God's existence or character. It may well come in the form of an over-attachment to something that is, in itself, perfectly good. The crucial warning is this: As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol.{10}

Many pack their lives with endless activities in order to block out the emotional emptiness and spiritual hunger that fills their souls. Nothing but God Himself can meet that need. David cried out to God saying, "Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the

joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."{11} The empty-self attempts to replace God with things God has created, a life that's too busy for God is missing out on life itself.

The empty-self is highly individualistic, infantile, narcissistic, passive, sensate, without an interior life, and too busy.

Curing the Empty-Self Syndrome

Is there a vaccine for the Empty-Self Syndrome? In his book *Love Your God With All Your Mind,* J. P. Moreland lists six steps for avoiding the empty-self. Like all maladies, we must first admit that there is a problem. Christians need to realize that faith and reason are not diametrically opposed to one another and that intellectual cultivation honors God. We need to begin talking about the role of the intellect and the value of a disciplined Christian mind. The results of not doing this will be a church with shallow theological understanding, little evangelistic confidence, and the inability to challenge the ideas that are dominant in the culture at-large. Christians will continue to be obsessed with self-help books that merely soothe, comfort, and entertain the reader.

Second, we need to choose to be different. We must be different from the typical church attendee who rarely reads or considers the questions and challenges of unbelievers, and different from the self-centered general culture that seeks knowledge only for power or financial gain.

Third, we might also need to change our routines. Believers would benefit by turning off the TV and instead participating in both physical exercise and quiet reflection. We need to get out of our passive ruts and be more proactive about growing spiritually and intellectually.

Fourth, we need to develop patience and endurance. The intellectual life takes time and diligence. It is a long-term, actually life-long, project and for some of us just sitting down for fifteen minutes might be difficult at first. Our newly developed patience is also needed for the fifth goal, that of developing a good vocabulary. As is true of any area of study, both theology and philosophy have their own languages and it takes time and effort to become conversant in them.

Finally, the last step is to establish intellectual goals. This is often best accomplished with the aid of a study partner or group. Setting out on a course of study and sharing what you find with someone else can be exhilarating. Although your study might begin in theology, it should eventually touch on a broad spectrum of ideas. Even reading recognized critics of Christianity is of value if you take the time to develop a response to their criticisms.

We should also teach our children that their studies are an important way to honor God. We are not advocating the development of the mind merely to collect information or to advance one's career. Our goal is to accomplish what Paul demands in 2 Corinthians 10:5. It is to be able to demolish any obstacle, or any pretension to the emancipating knowledge of God. The picture Paul is painting is that of a military operation in enemy territory.{12} It's time to start training!

Notes

1. J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), see chapter four for this discussion.
2. Titus 1:8-9
3. Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols For Destruction* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990), 322.
4. J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 90.

5. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), see part one on the student.
6. Ibid., 91.
7. Philippians 3:19-20
8. 2 Peter 1:3-7
9. 2 Peter 1:8
10. Os Guinness & John Seel, *No God But God* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 33.
11. Psalm 51:11-12
12. Murry J. Harris, *The Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 380.

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Time and Busyness

It has, perhaps, always been true that "time is money." But for the current generation, this maxim has a new twist. In the frenetic 90s, time has become even more scarce than money and therefore more valuable. As with any commodity, the law of supply and demand determines value. In the last two decades, free time has grown scarce and hence has become a valuable possession.

The 1990s is the decade of the time famine. Leisure time, once plentiful and elastic, is now scarce and elusive. People seeking the good life are finding it increasingly difficult to enjoy it, even if they can afford it. What money was in the 1980s, time has become in the 1990s.

According to a Lou Harris survey, the amount of leisure time enjoyed by the average American has shrunk 37 percent since 1973. A major reason is an expanding workweek. Over this same period, the average workweek (including commuting) has

increased from fewer than 41 hours to nearly 47 hours. And in many professions, such as medicine, law, and accounting, an 80-hour week is not uncommon. Harris therefore concludes that "time may have become the most precious commodity in the land."

The Technology of Time

Our current time crunch has caught most people off-guard. Optimistic futurists in the 1950s and 60s, with visions of utopia dancing in their heads, predicted Americans would enjoy ample hours of leisure by the turn of the century. Computers, satellites, and robotics would remove the menial aspects of labor and deliver abundant opportunities for rest and recreation.

The optimists were partly right: computers crunch data at unimaginable speeds, orbiting satellites cover the globe with a dizzying array of messages, and robots zap together everything from cars to computer chips at speeds far exceeding their human counterparts. Yet these and other technological feats have not freed Americans from their labors. Most people are busier than ever.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Testimony before a Senate subcommittee in 1967 predicted that "by 1985, people could be working just 22 hours a week or 27 weeks a year or could retire at 38." The major challenge facing people in the 1990s should have been what to do with all the leisure time provided by our technological wizardry.

Instead, technology has been more of an enemy than an ally. "Technology is increasing the heartbeat," says Manhattan architect James Trunzo, who designs automated environments. "We are inundated with information. The mind can't handle it all. The pace is so fast now, I sometimes feel like a gunfighter dodging bullets."

Actually, the problem isn’t so much technology as it is the heightened expectations engendered by it. The increased speed and efficiency of appliances, computers, and other machines have enabled us to accomplish much more than was possible in previous decades. But this efficiency has also fostered a desire to take on additional responsibilities and thereby squeeze even more activities into already crammed calendars.

As the pace of our lives has increased, over-commitment and busyness have been elevated to socially desirable standards. Being busy is chic and trendy. Pity the poor person who has an organized life and a livable schedule. Everyone, it seems, is running out of time.

Time-Controlling Devices

It is little wonder that most of the products now being developed are not so much time-savers as they are time-controllers. Most of the appliances developed in the 1950s—vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, mixers—were designed to save time and remove drudgery from housework. By comparison, most of the products developed in the 1980s—VCRs, answering machines, automatic tellers—were time- controllers. These devices do not save much time, but they do allow harried consumers to use their time more effectively.

Technological efficiency has also increased competition. Labor- saving devices that are supposed to make life easier frequently force people to work harder. Baby boomers who are intensely competing with one another for jobs and prestigious promotions avidly employ the latest equipment to give them an edge. Faxes, LANs, car phones, and laptop computers are viewed as necessities if one is to remain competitive.

But technology isn’t enough. So most professionals, especially those in service industries such as law, accounting, and advertising, work long hours in an effort to meet their clients’ seemingly endless needs and demands. Other baby

boomers feel trapped in the same rat race because economic pressures make it nearly impossible to support a family on one income.

The work ethic seems out of control. In the frenetic dash for success or just plain survival, leisure time becomes a scarce commodity. “My wife and I were sitting on the beach in Anguilla on one of our rare vacations,” recalls architect James Trunzo, “and even there my staff was able to reach me. There are times when our lives are clearly leading us.”

No Time to Talk

Everywhere, it seems, people are over-scheduled and over-committed. Workers are weary. Parents are preoccupied. And children and family relationships are often neglected.

A recent survey by Cynthia Langham at the University of Detroit found that parents and children spend only 14.5 minutes per day talking to each other. That is less time than a football quarter and certainly much less time than most people spend commuting to work.

She says that many people are shocked to hear the 14.5-minutes statistic. But once they take a stopwatch to their conversations, they realize she is right.

But that 14.5 minute statistic is misleading, since most of that time is squandered on chitchat like “What’s for supper?” and “Have you finished your homework?” Truly meaningful communication between parent and child unfortunately occupies only about two minutes each day. Langham concludes, “Nothing indicates that parent-child communications are improving. If things are changing, it’s for the worse.”

She points to two major reasons for this communication breakdown. First is a change in the workforce. A few decades ago the dinner table was a forum for family business and communication. But now, when dinner-time rolls around, Dad is

still at work, Mom is headed for a business meeting, and sister has to eat and run to make it to her part-time job. Even when everyone is home, there are constant interruptions to meaningful communication.

The second reason for poor parent-child communication is the greatest interruption of all: television. Urie Bronfenbrenner of Cornell has reported a forty-year decline in the amount of time children spend with their parents, and much of the recent loss is due to television. TV sabotages much of the already-limited time families spend together. Meals are frequently eaten in front of the "electronic fireplace." After dinner, talk-starved families gather to watch congenial television families with good communication skills, like the Huxtables on the Cosby show.

While some television shows deal with issues families might discuss (drugs, pregnancy, honesty), few families take advantage of these opportunities to talk about the dilemmas portrayed on the programs and provide moral instruction.

The greeting card business has developed a whole new product line for busy parents and children. More and more children are finding cards in their backpacks or under their pillows that proclaim, "Have a good day at school," or lament, "I wish I were there to tuck you in."

The effect of time pressures on the family has been devastating. Yale psychology professor Edward Ziglar somberly warns that "as a society, we're at the breaking point as far as family is concerned."

Homemaking and child- rearing are full-time activities. When both husband and wife work, maintaining a home and raising a family becomes difficult. In the increasing numbers of single-parent households, the task becomes next to impossible.

Someone has to drive car pools, make lunches, do laundry, cope with sick kids and broken appliances, and pay the bills. In

progressive homes, household tasks are shared as the traditional husband/wife division of labor breaks down. In others, super-Mom is expected to step into the gap and perform flawlessly.

Inevitably, children are forced to grow up quickly and take on responsibilities they should never have to shoulder. Some children are effectively abandoned—if not physically, at least emotionally- -and must grow up on their own. Others are latch-key kids who are forced to mature emotionally beyond their years. These demands take their toll and create what sociologist David Elkind has called the "hurried child" syndrome.

Time, or rather our lack of it, is severely hurting families. Nurturing suffers when families do not have time to communicate and parents do not have time to instruct their children. In the end, the lack of time takes its toll on the stability of our families.

Never Enough Time

A 1989 survey done by *Family Circle* documented the loss of time in families, especially for working mothers. The article, entitled "Never Enough Time?" began: "Remember 'quality time'? In the 1980's that was what you sandwiched in for the children between the office and the housework. We all learned how valuable time was in the school of hard knocks. Life was what happened while we were busy making other plans, to paraphrase ex-Beatle John Lennon." That was then.

A resounding 71 percent of those surveyed said their lives had gotten busier in the previous year. Nearly a third attributed this increase in busyness to expanding work loads at the office, the demands of a new job, or the pressures of starting a business or returning to work. Not only were the women working longer hours, but many were also working on weekends, and nearly a third often took work home.

Dual-income couples reported major difficulties finding time for each other. Negotiating schedules and calendar-juggling were daily activities. Three out of four women in the survey reported that finding enough time to be alone with their husbands was “often” or “sometimes” a major stress in their relationships. When asked, “In a time crunch, who gets put on the back burner?” half said friends, then husbands, and then other family members.

Those hit hardest by time pressures were single parents. One single mother with two teenagers in Illinois wrote: “I am responsible for a house and yard, work 40 hours a week, take college classes, run a local support group for divorced and widowed women and am involved with a retreat group through church. I have time because I *make* time.”

Often the first thing women will let slide is housekeeping. A full 82 percent said they had changed their standards of cleaning and organizing a house. When asked why, 49 percent said other things are more important, 42 percent said they were more relaxed about letting chores wait, 35 percent said they had one or more young children, and 23 percent said they had taken a paying job.

Organization expert Stephanie Winston says that the young generation of working women has reframed expectations about household responsibilities. She says, “Their sense of what is expected of them is really very different from what was expected 10 years ago, when women joining the work force had been raised on the old model—rearing the family, cooking, cleaning and the proverbial white-glove test.” But whether they were in the work force or full- time homemakers, more than half of the women surveyed were either “very” or “somewhat” dissatisfied with the amount of time they have alone. Only 30 percent try to set aside four or more hours a week just for themselves. Another 30 percent carve out two to three hours. But 19 percent say they give themselves an hour or less a week, and 20 percent do not allot themselves any

leisure time at all.

The time pressure on women and families is significant. The time crunch is squeezing out meaningful communication and important time to think and reflect. The additional time will not come without changes in our lifestyles.

Redeeming the Time

Time, or the lack of it, will continue to dominate our thinking through the 1990s. All of us are in the midst of a time crunch—the solution is to recognize our priorities and apply them rigorously to our lives.

First, we must establish biblical priorities in our lives. Often our busyness is merely a symptom of a deeper problem, such as materialism. In Luke 12, Jesus illustrated this danger with the parable of the rich fool. He says, “The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, `What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ And he said, `This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods, laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.”‘ But God said to him, `You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'”

There are a number of applications we can derive from this passage. First, we should make sure that we are not so involved in the affairs of the world that we neglect the affairs of the spirit. To turn the familiar adage around, we can be so earthly-minded we are no heavenly good.

Second, we should ask ourselves if we are tearing down productive resources for a more luxurious lifestyle. If a three-bedroom house is sufficient, are we selling it merely to move up to a four- bedroom house? If the car we are currently

driving is fine, are we nevertheless eager to trade it in on a newer or more expensive model? Often our indulgences constrain our time and financial resources.

This observation leads to our second biblical principle: fight materialism in our lives. Proverbs 28:20 says “He who makes haste to be rich will not go unpunished.” Materialism brings with it a haste to get rich. Materialistic people are not patient people. They want what they want, when they want it, and they want it now.

Often our lack of time is tied to our haste to get rich, to feed our greed. We need to ask ourselves the fundamental question, How much do we really need? If we fight materialism in our lives and cut back on the lavishness of our lifestyle, we might be surprised how much time we will free up.

A third biblical principle is to redeem the time. Ephesians 5:15-16 says “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.” Colossians 4:5 says, “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, redeeming the time.”

Unlike many of the other resources God has given us, time is not renewable. We may lose money, but we can always earn more. We may lose our possessions, but we can always acquire new ones. But time is a non-renewable commodity. If we squander our time, it is lost forever.

All of us, but especially Christians, must carefully manage the time that God has given us. It is a valuable resource, and we can either spend it on ourselves or redeem it as a spiritual investment. We can spend it only once, and how we spend it can have eternal consequences. Let us not waste the resources God has given us. Instead, let us redeem the time and use it for God’s glory.

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