

# Emerging Adults: A Closer Look at Issues Facing Young Christians

“Emerging adults” is a term coined by sociologists to capture the new reality of 18- to 30-year-old Americans who have not fully assumed the responsibilities of classic adulthood. In previous articles, we looked at disturbing information on the beliefs of emerging adults in America from surveys by Christian Smith of Notre Dame, by Probe Ministries, and by others. In them, we found clear evidence of accelerating erosion in accepting and adhering to basic biblical truths for living, even among those who were born again. Our emerging cultural milieu of pop post-modernism is clearly taking many young adult Christians captive to the “philosophies of men” (Col. 2:8). Here we will take a closer look at the erosion of belief in several important areas.

✖ Christian Smith and his fellow researchers at Notre Dame published an initial book, *Souls in Transition*, covering the results of their 2008 survey of the religious beliefs and actions of emerging adults from age 18 through 23. We discussed their findings in two earlier articles: [Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America](#), and [Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths](#). Their deep distress over some of the results of their surveys and interviews led them to publish a follow-up book in 2011 entitled *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. In this book, they focus on five specific areas of concern identified by their earlier research:

1. *Moral aimlessness*
2. *Materialistic consumerism*

### *3. Intoxicated living*

### *4. Deep troubles from sexually liberated behavior*

### *5. Lack of interest in civic and political life*

The troubling characteristics of emerging adult life in America in the early years of the twenty-first century remind us of what Paul warned of in 2 Timothy when he wrote: “in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, . . . arrogant, . . . ungrateful, . . . without self-control, . . . reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (2 Tim 3:1-5).

One major factor in the growth of these problems is the widespread acceptance of pop post-modernism throughout our culture. As Smith points out, the post-modern theory became “democratized and vulgarized in U.S. culture” becoming a “simple-minded ideology presupposing the cultural construction of everything, individualistic subjectivism, soft ontological antirealism and absolute moral relativism.”[\[1\]](#)

This popularized post-modern view says there is no objective truth, only the practical truth I choose to live by with my friends. This view leads to a basic disconnect with the teaching of Jesus who claimed His purpose was to “testify to the truth” (Jn. 18:37) because He is the truth.

Dale Tackett, author of The Truth Project, put the problem this way, “When what is right is what’s good for me, you will find all of the moral chaos that we see today.”[\[2\]](#)

In what follows, we will focus on three of the five areas of concern: moral aimlessness, materialistic consumerism, and the lack of interest in civic and political life.

## Moral Viewpoint – A Floating Standard

In his study of American emerging adults, Smith found that their morality is adrift with no standard to hold it in place.

What is morality in the first place? Morality is defined as “a system of ideas of right and wrong conduct.”[\[3\]](#) For Christians, this system is set out for us in the Bible, particularly in the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Jesus, and the New Testament epistles. The Bible makes it clear that God is the source of true morality. It is our responsibility to learn and apply His moral precepts. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Or as Paul instructed in 1Thessalonians, “examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil” (5:21-22). Paul is saying hold fast to the morality taught by Christ.

In a Christian nation, how can there be any confusion about morality? Well, sixty percent of emerging adults say that “morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision. Moral rights and wrongs are essentially matters of individual opinion, in their view.”[\[4\]](#) And where do these opinions come from? One emerging adult put it this way, “Like just kinda things that I thought up, that I decided was right for me. So I don’t know. I honestly don’t. It just kinda came outta thin air.”[\[5\]](#) So, we can either look for the Bible as the source of our morality or we can just create it out of thin air.

When faced with a moral choice, almost half of them said they would do what made them feel happy or would help them get ahead. Less than one out of five said they would “do what God or the scripture” says is right. Many of them said they would not really know if their choice was right or wrong until after it was done and they could evaluate how they felt about it.

Not only do they not look to the Bible or society for their moral compass; they believe that it is morally wrong to assume there is a common morality that applies to all. Because we must be tolerant and accept other's views as right for them, we must not apply our moral precepts to their actions. As Smith put it, "Giving voice to one's own moral views is itself nearly immoral." What they fail to realize is that complete moral relativism and tolerance actually dishonor the beliefs of others. With this view, they cannot accept new views which are superior to their own or act to correct views which are inferior. What someone else thinks is about morality is immaterial to them.

This type of thinking will ultimately lead to disaster for the people embracing it. As Chuck Colson said, "So often, the great disasters (of the past) were caused by people disregarding God's standard of right and wrong and doing what was right in their own eyes . . . We've stopped moral teaching in our country and we are seeing the inevitable consequence of failing to teach moral values to a culture. We are seeing chaos." [\[6\]](#)

The whole topic of morality is not something most emerging adults give much thought to. One third of them could not think of any moral dilemmas that they had faced in their lives, while another third of them offered examples that were not actually moral dilemmas. For example, one of them stated, "I guess renting the apartment thing, whether or not I would be able to afford it." That is a dilemma but it is not a moral dilemma. So through their education from their parents and schools, the vast majority of emerging adults really have not gained a good working knowledge of the concept of morality much less its importance to society. Yet in 1 Peter, Peter makes it clear that our moral actions are one of the most important ways that Christians can share the good news of Jesus Christ. As he said, "For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men"

(2:15).

## **Consumerism – The True Objective of Life**

What impact has consumer culture had on the lives of emerging adults?

As Christians, our lives are to be about far more than how much we are able to consume. Jesus never gave his disciples instructions on how to increase their economic wealth. Instead, He sent his disciples out to minister with little more than the clothes on their backs. Similarly, Paul learned to be content with whatever the Lord provided. He states, “I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:12-14). To be clear, the Bible does teach us much about how to operate successfully in the business world. But, it is also clear that our purpose in life is to be focused on things with eternal value and not on how much we can accumulate and consume on this earth.

Yet, as a whole, the young, emerging adults in this nation have missed the call of Christ to focus our lives on the eternal rather than the temporal. Instead, not only have they bought into consumerism as the primary goal of life, but they appear to be unable to consider any shortcomings in a life focused on what they can consume. Smith reports, “Contemporary emerging adults are either true believers or complacent conformists when it comes to mass consumerism.”[\[7\]](#)

As one emerging adult put it, “It feels good to be able to get things that you want and you work for the money. If you want something, you go get it. It makes your life more comfortable and I guess it just make you feel good about yourself as well.”[\[8\]](#) That statement by itself might not seem so bad until

you realize that it is their sole method to feel good about themselves. The more you can consume the better. They miss the balanced view of material things taught in the Bible. For example, in Proverbs we are told,

*Give me neither poverty nor riches;*

*Feed me with the food that is my portion,*

*That I not be full and deny You and say, "Who is the LORD?"*

*Or that I not be in want and steal,*

*And profane the name of my God (Prov. 30:8,9).*

In addition, the idea of limiting one's consumption in order to have the resources to help others is foreign to most emerging adults. Many of them would like to see the needs of the starving people met, "just not by me, not now." If they ever reach a state in life where all their consumer desires are met, then they may consider using some resources for charitable causes. One obvious problem with this approach is that our consumer conscious society always has something new and better that you must purchase and experience.

This attitude is in contrast to that of the Macedonians Paul commends in his second letter to the Corinthian church:

*. . . that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God (2 Cor. 8:1-6).*

Rather than "seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness"

and letting the material things be of secondary importance, most young America adults are seeking consumer nirvana and its false sense of well being. With no external moral compass for guidance, they are unwilling to express concerns about the grossest forms of excessive consumerism. As most of them said when asked, "If someone wants it, who am I to say that they are wrong?" When emerging adults refer to a good life, they talk about what they want to possess rather than the good that they can contribute to the world. I find it sad to think about being remembered for how much I consumed rather than how much I contributed. But this thought does not seem to bother these emerging adults.

## **Civic and Political Involvement – Not For Me**

Let continue by examining another disturbing characteristic of young, emerging adults identified by Christian Smith through his extensive surveys and interviews over the last five years: their perception of civic and political involvement. Smith summarizes their attitude by saying, "The vast majority of the emerging adults we interviewed remain . . . politically disengaged, uninformed, and distrustful. Most in fact feel disempowered, apathetic, and sometimes even despairing when it comes to the larger social, civic, and political world beyond their own lives." [\[9\]](#) When we consider that the polls and interviews driving this assessment occurred in the summer of 2008 during the perceived youth movement which brought President Obama into office, this result on political involvement is particularly surprising.

Some might say that being actively involved in politics is not the right course of action for Christians. And, thus, they may applaud this result. We certainly agree that our primary purpose as Christians will not and cannot be fulfilled through political action. However, what we are talking about here is

not a lack of political activism, but rather a disengagement from active participation in the political process. As Paul instructed Timothy, "I urge that entreaties, prayers, petitions and thanksgivings be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). We are to be concerned about the impact of government on our lives. If the people Paul were writing to had the right to vote, I am confident he would have said to pray for and exercise your right to vote.

Through his research, Smith identified six different attitudes toward civic involvement among emerging adults. These attitudes are:

- 1. The apathetic are completely uninterested in politics and make up twenty-seven percent of emerging adults. It is important to note that these individuals were not apathetic in general, just about this area of life.*
- 2. The uninformed said their lack of interest was driven by their lack of knowledge about the issues and the players. The uninformed made up thirteen percent of emerging adults.*
- 3. The distrustful know a reasonable amount about political issues but do not participate because they distrust the political system and politicians. They believe exercising their right to vote will not make any difference.*
- 4. The disempowered point to their inability to change the world (rather than distrust of the process) as their reason to be uninvolved. Around ten percent of emerging adults fall into this category.*
- 5. The marginally political represent those who expressed some interest in politics but whose interest did not appear to lead to actual involvement in the process. These marginally political emerging adults make up twenty-seven percent of those interviewed.*



*6. That leaves four percent of emerging adults (all males) who appear to be genuinely political; that is, interested and involved in the process.*

In summary, their interviews found two-thirds of the emerging adult population completely uninvolved and almost one-third with a very limited involvement. This meant only four percent considered the process an important responsibility in life.

This seemingly fatalistic view of politics was found to carry over in other areas of civic involvement such as volunteering and charitable giving. Smith summarized their results saying, "Contrary to some of the stories told in the popular media, most emerging adults in America have extremely modest hopes, if any, that they can change society or the world for the better, whether by volunteering or anything else."[\[10\]](#) With that perception, providing help to others is not a requirement for righteousness, but simply an optional personal choice that most are not prepared to make.

Thinking back to our earlier discussion on the lack of a moral viewpoint, Smith's research found a significant association between those who believe all morality is relative and individualistic and an attitude of apathy, ignorance, and distrust of the political process. In addition, Smith found a significant relationship between "enthusiasm for mass consumerism and lack of interest in political participation."[\[11\]](#) So these three attitudes (no moral standards, consumer consumption as our primary objective, and no real political or civic involvement) appear to be common elements of the emerging adult belief system.

## **Emerging Adults – Where Will They Take Us?**

One root cause of the attitudes expressed by emerging adults

in American is pop post-modern individualism. Each individual must decide what is true for him or her and must not accept a common truth. Therefore, most emerging adults cannot grasp the concept of an objective reality beyond their individual selves that would have any bearing on their lives. As we have seen, this concept undermines their moral compass, their attitudes about consumer consumption, and their involvement in society through politics, volunteering, and charitable giving.

These dominant patterns of emerging adult thought in America should make us consider: "What does it mean?" and, "How can we do something about it?" Some might say it is just the way young people are. We were that way when we were young. They will snap out of it. To that idea Smith would say, "It is a different world today. . . . To think otherwise is to self-impose a blurred vision that cannot recognize real life as it is experienced today and so cannot take emerging adults seriously."[{12}](#)

Others may say that is not what I hear on the news. Our young adults are leading a new wave of service and public involvement. To which Smith would say, "The fact that anyone ever believed that idea simply tells us how flimsy the empirical evidence that so many journalistic media stories are based upon is and how unaccountable to empirical reality high-profile journalism can be. . . . we – without joy – can set the record straight here: almost all emerging adults today are either apathetic, uninformed, distrustful, disempowered, or , at most marginally interested when it comes to politics and public life. Both the fact itself and the reasons for it speak poorly of the condition of our larger culture and society."[{13}](#) He continues: "One tendency is to claim that emerging adults are deeply committed to social justice, passionately engaged in political activism, actively volunteering in their local communities, devoting themselves to building a greener, more peaceful and just world. Almost nothing could be further from the truth."[{14}](#)

Although the vast majority of emerging adults are disengaged from involvement in the public sphere, they are quite engaged in a different way. As Smith points out, “they pursue these private-sphere emotional and relational investments with fervent devotion. . . . progressing yet further toward the nearly total submersion of self into fluidly constructed, private networks of technologically managed intimates and associates.”[{15}](#) He is referring of course to their disconnected connections via Facebook, Twitter, and other electronic social media.

We believe that there are several positive actions that we can take as Christians to improve this situation.

First, we need to examine ourselves. Are we living our lives under the direction of the ultimate source of morality, Jesus Christ? Are we consumed by consumerism or are we living for eternity? Are we taking an active part in impacting our society so that we may live godly and peaceful lives for Christ?

Next, we need to recognize that emerging adults under the age of thirty are, for the most part, not taking on the full responsibilities of adulthood. They are still emerging and, consequently, still need coaching. However, as Smith points out, “One of the striking social features of emerging adulthood is how structurally disconnected most emerging adults are from older adults. . . . Most emerging adults live this crucial decade of life surrounded mostly by their peers . . . who have no more experience, insight, wisdom, perspective, or balance than they do.”[{16}](#) As parents, pastors, co-workers, we should continue to actively engage them in a mentor role. It is important that:

- 1. They understand we look to the Bible as the source for our moral decisions.*

- 2. We are living in this world as citizens of heaven and as*

*such consumer consumption is not our purpose for living.*

*3. We have a responsibility to be engaged in our society to keep our freedom to lead godly lives serving the Lord.*

The apostle Peter put it this way: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles so that in the thing in which they slander you as evil doers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:11,12).

Finally, we need to reach out to emerging adults who are already involved in evangelical churches. We need to let them know that it is okay to engage others with their worldview and their source of truth, Jesus Christ. When they don’t share their worldview with others as a gift from God, they are effectively consigning those others to hell. Probe is in the midst of preparing materials that you can use in your church to directly address these issues.

Christian Smith captured the essence of this problem when he wrote, “Might it be true that the farthest boundary of sight that youth today can envision as real and being worth pursuit is entirely imminent, purely material, and completely mundane?”[\[17\]](#) As Christians, our boundary extends beyond this universe to the halls of heaven and puts our lives in a new perspective. Let that eternal perspective be seen in every area of your life.

As historian Christopher Lasch put it, “There is only one cure for the malady that afflicts our culture, and that is to speak the truth about it.”[\[18\]](#)

## **Notes**

1. Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of*

*Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 15.

2. Del Tackett and Chuck Colson, *The Way Out: God's Solution to Moral Chaos in America*, 2011, [www.truthinaction.org/index.php/landing-doing-the-right-thing-full-episode/](http://www.truthinaction.org/index.php/landing-doing-the-right-thing-full-episode/)

3. *American Heritage Dictionary*, s.v. "Morality."

4. Smith, *Lost*, 21.

5. *Ibid.*, 22.

6. Tackett and Colson, *The Way Out*.

7. Smith, *Lost*, 72.

8. *Ibid.*, 73.

9. *Ibid.*, 196.

10. *Ibid.*, 211.

11. *Ibid.*, 218.

12. *Ibid.*, 227.

13. *Ibid.*, 224-5.

14. *Ibid.*, 228.

15. *Ibid.*, 223.

16. *Ibid.*, 234.

17. *Ibid.*, 236.

18. Christopher Lasch, "Give Youth Cause to Believe in Tomorrow," *International Herald Tribune*, December 29, 1989.

### See Also:

[Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America](#)

[Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths](#)

[The Importance of Parents in the Faith of Emerging Adults](#)

[Cultural Captives – a book on the faith of emerging adults](#)

---

# American Cultural Captivity

*Kerby Anderson provides an overview of ways in which American Christians are culturally captive: individualism, consumerism, racism, church growth values and globalization.*

## Cultural Captivity

Probe Ministries has dedicated itself to helping Christians be freed from cultural captivity. Therefore, I want to focus on how we as Americans are often captive to an American form of Christianity and thus are culturally captive.



Before we address the issue of cultural captivity, it might be worth mentioning how small American Christianity is compared to the rest of the world. Philip Jenkins reports that “the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”[{1}](#)

We can put this in perspective by looking at what happened last century. In 1900, about eighty percent of the Christians in the world lived in Europe or North America. Now more than seventy percent live in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

A century ago, if you were to describe a typical Christian in the world, you would probably describe a Christian living in the middle of the United States. Today a typical Christian would be a mother in Zambia or a college student in South Korea.

Christianity has also become diverse. “More people pray and worship in more languages and with more differences in styles of worship in Christianity than any other religion.”[\[2\]](#) Put simply, American Christianity is no longer the norm in the world. Yet we as Americans often make the mistake of assuming that our Western values and assumptions should be the standard for the rest of the world.

Many of my observations come from insights in the book, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*.[\[3\]](#) Soong-Chan Rah provides numerous examples of how the American church is captive to a white, Western view of the world and thus is culturally captive. Obviously, the church has been captive to materialism, but I will focus on some of his other descriptions of captivity, namely, individualism, consumerism, and racism.

It is worth noting that the phrase “captivity of the church” has been used in different contexts with varied meanings throughout church history. Martin Luther, for example, wrote the tract *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in which he compared the Catholic Church’s teaching on the sacraments to the captivity of the Israelites by the Babylonians.[\[4\]](#) R.C. Sproul has written about how many Christians are captive to the Pelagian view of the basic goodness of humanity instead of holding to the biblical view on original sin.[\[5\]](#) And Nancy Pearcey’s book *Total Truth* was written as an attempt at “liberating Christianity from its cultural captivity.”[\[6\]](#)

American Christians don’t like to think of themselves as being culturally captive. But the truth is that they have to a significant extent been assimilated into American culture.

While they rightly criticize many of the sins and failings of American society, they are more conformed to the culture than they would like to believe.

## Individualism

One example of American cultural captivity that Rah uses in his book is American individualism. He is hardly the first person to talk about this. Many social commentators over the last century have discussed and documented American's obsession with individualism which has created an individual-focused worldview.

On the positive side, the rugged individualism of Americans is responsible for the willingness to explore, build, and being willing to "go it alone" when circumstances required it. An individual willing to take a bold stand in the midst of theological heresy or cultural captivity is a good thing.

American individualism also has many negative sides. Christians should be aware of the impact of individualism on their theology. Rah says "the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture. The individualistic philosophy that has shaped Western society, and consequently shaped the American church, reduces faith to a personal, private and individual faith." [\[7\]](#)

To put this in perspective, consider that most of the books of the New Testament were written to churches and communities of believers. Only a handful of books (such as Titus and Philemon) were written to individuals. Yet when most Americans read the New Testament, they focus on the individual aspects of the biblical truth rather than consider the larger corporate aspect being presented in Scripture.

Often our Bible study focuses on the individual and personal understanding of God's Word when so much of it applies to our



relationship to the entire body of Christ. Often worship is self-focused and self-absorbed.

Ask a typical Christian about sin, and he or she is likely to describe it in personal terms. Sin certainly is personal, but it can also be corporate. But if you only have a personal, privatized faith, then you are also likely to see sin as merely a personal matter. Rah concludes: “Evangelical theology becomes exclusively an individual-driven theology instead of a community-driven theology.”[\[8\]](#)

## Consumerism

Another example of American cultural captivity that Rah gives is consumerism. This is a topic that I have addressed before not only on radio but in my book *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times*.[\[10\]](#) Even secular commentators have noticed that American culture is infected with “affluenza.”[\[11\]](#)

Rah says, “Materialism and consumerism reduce people to a commodity. An individual’s worth in society is based upon what assets they bring and what possessions they own.”[\[12\]](#)

How has consumerism affected the American church? First, it means that we have been willing to include materialistic values into our worldview and lifestyle. Often it is difficult to distinguish Christian values from the materialistic values of American society. Some commentators point out that many of our churches look more like shopping malls than like churches.

Second, consumerism affects our mindset and perspective about spiritual things. A consumer mindset sees the spiritual life as a consumable product only if it benefits the individual. Believers with a consumer mindset usually aren’t living for eternity but for the here and now. Essentially they are so earthly minded, they are no heavenly good.

Third, consumerism affects the way we choose to fellowship

with other believers. “American evangelicalism has created the unique phenomenon of church shopping—viewing church as yet another commodity and product to be evaluated and purchased. When a Christian family moves to a new city, how much of the standards by which they choose a church is based upon a shopping list of their personal tastes and wants rather than their commitment to a particular community or their desire to serve a particular neighborhood?”[\[13\]](#)

Finally, consumerism even affects the way we measure success. We should be measuring success by the standards of Scripture. Often, we measure it by the American consumer value system. Consider what many refer to as the ABCs of church growth. These are: attendance, building, and cash. Often the success of a church is measured in the same way a secular business would measure its success. The bottom line is often the number of attendees or the size of the church budget.

Jesus asked in Mark 8:36, “What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?” A consumer mentality often chooses short-term solutions instead of eternal values despite the possibility of long-term negative consequences.

## **Racism**

Another example of American cultural captivity that Rah gives is racism. Not only was this a chapter in this book, but he actually wrote another book on the subject of racial and ethnic issues.[\[14\]](#)

Let’s begin by stating that the idea of race is actually artificial. As I pointed out in a previous radio program on [Race and Racial Issues](#), both the Bible and modern science reject the idea of what today we call race. For example, the Bible teaches that God has made “from one blood every nation of men” (Acts 17:26). Here Paul is teaching the Athenians that they came from the same source in the creation as everyone

else. We are all from one blood. In other words, there are no superior or inferior races. The Bible refers to people groups and nations, but does not label based upon skin color.

Race is also an imprecise scientific term. For example, people of every race can interbreed and produce fertile offspring. It turns out that the so-called differences in the races are not very great. A recent study of human genetic material of different races concluded that the DNA of any two people in the world would differ by just 2/10ths of one percent.[{15}](#) And of this variation, only six percent can be linked to racial categories. The remaining ninety-four percent is “within race” variation. That is why “many scientists are now declaring that the concept of race has no basis in the biological sciences, more and more are concurring that race should be seen as a social invention.”[{16}](#)

How have racial ideas and prejudice affected the church? It is tempting to say that this was merely a problem in the past and should be no concern for a country moving towards a post-racial society. Soong-Chan Rah disagrees: “We are quick to deal with the symptoms of sin in America, but oftentimes are unwilling to deal with the original sin of America: namely, the kidnapping of Africans to use as slave labor, and usurping of lands belonging to Native Americans and subsequent genocide of indigenous peoples.”[{17}](#)

Race is an important issue not only in our past, but our future. Many church growth methods are based upon the idea of racial homogeneity. If it is true that the most segregated place in American culture is an American church at 11 AM on Sunday morning, perhaps we should pay more attention to race and racial issues.

## **Church Growth and Globalization**

We can even see cultural captivity in the way we build our

churches and the way we interact with the world. We can see the impact some of these ideas about race and racial issues have on church growth.

The popular church growth movement places a high priority on what is called the “homogeneous unit principle” in order to have substantial numerical growth within a congregation. Homogeneous churches tend to grow faster because church attendees are more comfortable with people with similar racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Racially and ethnically segregated churches are the natural result of such teaching. And not only are segregated churches unbiblical, they are impractical. America in the twenty-first century will be more diverse than any previous century. It will no longer be dominated by white, Eurocentric people.

Church growth principles also prioritize “an individualized, personal evangelism and salvation over the understanding of the power of the gospel to transform neighborhoods and communities. They also emphasize a modern, social science approach to ministry, focusing on a pragmatic planning process that leads to measurable success goals.”[\[18\]](#)

Globalization is another challenge in the twenty-first century and can also illustrate how we spread our cultural captivity to the corners of the world. Globalization often means that one nation’s values and mindset predominate. In this case, American Christian values (which often are not biblical) are spread and dominate other cultures.

Thomas Friedman says, “Culturally speaking, globalization is largely, though not entirely, the spread of Americanization—from Big Macs to iMacs to Mickey Mouse—on a global scale.”[\[19\]](#) Globalization not only allows us to spread the influence of Coca-Cola, Starbucks, and McDonalds, but it also is the means by which American cultural captivity is spread to believers around the globe. Once these values are

transmitted to the rest of the world, we will have a global Christianity that is just as culturally captive to American values as American Christians have been.

This is our challenge in the twenty-first century. American Christians cannot merely look at Christians in other countries and shake their heads about their captivity to their particular cultural values. We too must be aware of culture captivity in our midst and “see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception” (Colossians 2:8). We have been assimilated into the American culture and should “not be conformed to this world” but instead should be “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

## Notes

1. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.
2. Ibid.
3. Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).
4. Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* trans. A.T.W. Steinhaeuser, *Three Treaties* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947).
5. R.C. Sproul, “The Pelagian Captivity of the Church,” *Modern Reformation*, May/June 2001.
6. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).
7. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 30.
8. Ibid., 40.
9. Ibid., 43.
10. Kerby Anderson, *Making the Most of Your Money in Tough Times* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009).
11. John DeGraaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).
12. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 48.

13. Ibid., 55.
14. Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2010).
15. J. C. Gutin, "End of the Rainbow," *Discover*, November 1994, 71-75.
16. Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007), xi.
17. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 69.
18. Ibid., 95.
19. Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 199), 8.

© 2011 Probe Ministries

---

## Consumerism – A Biblical Perspective

*Kerby Anderson examines ways in which a consumerist mindset is a concern for both society and the church. He concludes by providing a biblical perspective.*

Consumerism is a concern within society and within the church. So I would like to analyze both of these areas of concern by citing books that address this issue. The classic secular book on this subject is *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*.[\[1\]](#) An excellent Christian book that deals with the topic of consumerism (in one of its chapters) is Michael Craven's book *Uncompromised Faith: Overcoming Our Culturalized Christianity*.[\[2\]](#)

What is consumerism? Many people use the terms *materialism* and *consumerism* interchangeably. But there is a difference.

Consumerism is much more than mere materialism. It is a way of perceiving the world that has affected all of us (especially Americans)—young and old, rich and poor, believer and non-believer—in significant ways. Essentially it is a never-ending desire to possess material goods and to achieve personal success.

Others have defined consumerism as *having* rather than *being*.<sup>{3}</sup> Your worth and value are measured by what you have rather than by who you are. It is buying into a particular lifestyle in order to find your value, worth, and dignity. As Christians we should be defined by the fact that we are created in God's image and have intrinsic worth and dignity.

Even secular writers see the problems with consumerism. The writers of *Affluenza* say that it is a virus that "is not confined to the upper classes but has found its way throughout our society. Its symptoms affect the poor as well as the rich . . . *Affluenza* infects all of us, though in different ways."<sup>{4}</sup>

The authors go on to say that "the *Affluenza* epidemic is rooted in the obsessive, almost religious quest for economic expansion that has become the core principle of what is called the American dream."<sup>{5}</sup>

*Affluenza* is rooted in a number of key concepts. First, it is rooted in the belief that the measure of national progress can be measured by the gross domestic product. Second, it is rooted in the idea that each generation must do better economically than the previous generation.

The consequences of this are devastating to both the nation and individuals. We are living in a time when the economic realities should be restraining spending (both as a nation and as individuals). Instead, we have corporately and individually pursued a lifestyle of "buy now and pay later" in order to expand economically. As we have discussed in previous

articles, this philosophy has not served us well.

In an attempt to find happiness and contentment by pursuing “the good life,” Americans have instead found it empty. Consumerism seems to promise fulfillment, but alas, it is merely an illusion. Consumerism does not satisfy.

## **Inverted Values and Changing Attitudes**

Anyone looking at some of the social statistics for the U.S. might conclude that our priorities are out of whack. For example, we spend more on shoes, jewelry, and watches than on higher education. We spend much more on auto maintenance than on religious and welfare activities. And three times as many Americans buy Christmas presents for their pets than buy a present for their neighbors.[{6}](#)

Debt and waste also show skewed priorities. More Americans have declared personal bankruptcy than graduated from college. Our annual production of solid waste would fill a convoy of garbage trucks stretching halfway to the moon. We have twice as many shopping centers as high schools.[{7}](#)

Americans seem to be working themselves to death in order to pay for everything they own or want to buy. We now work more hours each year than do the citizens of any other industrial country, including Japan. And according to Department of Labor statistics, full-time American workers are putting in one hundred sixty hours more (essentially one month more) than they did in 1969.[{8}](#) And ninety-five percent of our workers say they wish they could spend more time with their families.[{9}](#)

Americans do recognize the problem and are trying to simplify their lives. A poll by the Center for a New American Dream showed a change in attitudes and action. The poll revealed that eighty-five percent of Americans think our priorities are out of whack. For example, nearly nine in ten (eighty-eight



percent) said American society is too materialistic. They also found that most Americans (ninety-three percent) feel we are too focused on working and making money. They also believed (ninety-one percent) that we buy and consume more than we need. More than half of Americans (fifty-two percent) said they have too much debt.[{10}](#)

The poll found that many Americans were taking steps to work less, even if that meant reducing their consuming. Nearly half of Americans (forty-eight percent) say they voluntarily made changes in their life in order to get more time and have a less stressful life. This increase in the number of self-proclaimed “down-shifters” suggests the beginning of a national change in priorities.

Perhaps Americans are coming to the realization that more consumer goods don't make them happy. Think back to the year 1957. That was the year that the program *Leave it to Beaver* premiered on television. It was also the year that the Russians shot Sputnik into space. That was a long time ago.

But 1957 is significant for another reason. It was that year that Americans described themselves as “very happy” reached a plateau.[{11}](#) Since then there has been an ever declining percentage of Americans who describe themselves that way even though the size of the average home today is twice what it was in the 1950s and these homes are filled with consumer electronics someone back then could only dream about.

## **Undermining the Family and Church**

What has been the impact of consumerism? Michael Craven talks about how consumerism has undermined the family and the church.

The family has been adversely affected by the time pressures created by a consumer mentality. Family time used to be insulated to a degree from employment demands. That is no

longer true. “We no longer hesitate to work weekends and evenings or to travel Sundays, for example, in order to make the Monday-morning meeting.”[\[12\]](#) As we have already mentioned, Americans are working more hours than ever before. The signal that is being sent throughout the corporate world is that you must be willing to sacrifice time with your family in order to get ahead. And that is exactly what is taking place.

Sociologists have concluded that “since 1969 the time American parents spend with their children has declined by 22 hours per week.”[\[13\]](#) Some have questioned this study because its estimate of the decline came from subtracting increased employment hours of parents from total waking hours. But I believe it makes the point that families are suffering from consumerism and this study parallels other studies that have looked at the decline in quality parent-child interaction at home.

The bottom line is this: Americans may talk about family values and quality time with their kids but their behavior demonstrates that they don’t live those values. Frequently children and their needs are sacrificed on the altar of career success. The marketplace trumps family time more than we would like to think that it does.

The church has also been undermined by consumerism. Busy lifestyles and time pressures crowd out church attendance. Weekly church attendance has reached an all-time low in America. And even for those who try to regularly attend church, attendance is sometimes hit-or-miss. Years ago I realized how difficult it was to teach a series in a Sunday School class because there was so little continuity in attendance from one week to the next.

Craven points out that those who are dissatisfied with a consumerist-created lifestyle turn to church for meaning and purpose. Unfortunately, they think that “by integrating a ‘little religion’ into their lives they will balance and

perfect the lifestyle. Tragically, they do not realize it is not their lifestyle that is in need of salvation, it is their very souls.”[\[14\]](#)

Consumerism also affects the way we go about the Christian life. Religious consumerists add spiritual disciplines to their life in the same way they approach work (as a task to be fulfilled with measurable goals). In the end, spiritual activity becomes one more item on a to-do list.

Craven reminds us that Jesus Christ is not to be treated as one good among many. Jesus Christ should be the supreme Good and the source of all life.

## **Undermining the Community and Character**

What has been the impact of consumerism? Craven talks about how consumerism has undermined community and how it has also undermined virtue and character. “With the increased priority given to the marketplace, there follows a decreased commitment to neighbors, community, and connections to extended family; children are displaced in pursuit of opportunities, and familial priorities become subverted to company demands.”[\[15\]](#)

This has an adverse impact on citizenship. People are no longer citizens but consumers. Citizens have duties and responsibilities to their fellow citizens. Consumers do not. They are merely partaking of what the consumer economy provides for them. Citizens care about others and their community. Consumers only care about what the society can provide to them.

Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer predicted that as society moved from the “death of God” to what today we can call the “death of truth” there would only be two things left: “personal peace and personal prosperity.” Schaeffer argued that once Americans accepted these values, they would sacrifice everything to protect their personal peace and

affluence.{16}

Consumerism also undermines virtue and character. It “shifts the objective of human life away from cultivating virtue and character, knowing truth, and being content to an artificially constructed, idealized lifestyle that is continually reinforced through media, entertainment, and advertising.”{17}

With this view of life, things become more important than people. Having is more important than being. And it is a lifestyle that pursues distraction (sports, entertainment, hobbies, etc.) almost in an effort to keep from thinking about the real world and its circumstances.

As we have already noted, consumerism does not satisfy. In fact, it can be argued that a consumerist mentality puts us in an emotional place where we are perpetually discontent. We are unable to rest in that which is good because we always want more. This is made even more difficult in our world where advertising images provide a seemingly endless series of choices that are promoted to us as necessary in order to achieve the perfect life.

Michael Craven points out that when Christians talk about being content, this is often ridiculed as being willing to “settle for less” and even condemned as “lazy, defeatist, and even irresponsible.”{18} Instead we are spurred on by talk of “doing all things to the glory of God” which can be used to justify a consumerist mentality.

## **A Biblical Perspective on Materialism and Consumerism**

We live in a culture that encourages us to buy more and more. No longer are we encouraged to live within our means. We are tempted to buy more than just the necessities and tempted to spend more on luxuries. The Bible warns us about this.

Proverbs 21:17 says, "He who loves pleasure will become a poor man; He who loves wine and oil will not become rich."

In our lifetimes we have lots of money that flows through our hands, and we need to make wiser choices. Consider that a person who makes just \$25,000 a year will in his lifetime have a million dollars pass through his hands. The median family income in America is twice that. That means that two million dollars will pass through the average American family's hands.

A tragic aspect of consumerism is that there is never enough. There is always the desire for more because each purchase only satisfies for short while. Then there is the need for more and more. Essentially, it is the law of diminishing returns. Economists use a more technical term—the law of diminishing marginal return. Simply put, the more we get, the less it satisfies and the more we want.

Once again the Bible warns us about this. Haggai 1:5-6 says, "Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Consider your ways! You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes.'"

We should also be responsible citizens. A tragic consequence of consumerism is what it does to the average citizen. James Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere*, believes we have "mutated from citizens to consumers." He says that "consumers have no duties or responsibilities or obligations to their fellow consumers. Citizens do. They have the obligation to care about their fellow citizens and about the integrity of the town's environment and history."[\[19\]](#)

America was once a nation of joiners. Alexis de Tocqueville noted this in his book *Democracy in America*. Americans would join in all sorts of voluntary associations. But we seem to no

longer be joiners but loners. Sure, there are still many people volunteering and giving their time. But much of this is “on the run” as we shuffle from place to place in our busy lives.

Christians are called to be the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13) and the light of the world (Matthew 5:14-16). We are also called to be ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). We must resist the temptations of consumerism that encourage us to focus on ourselves and withdraw from active involvement in society.

## Notes

1. John DeGraaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).
2. Michael Craven, *Uncompromised Faith: Overcoming Our Culturalized Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009).
3. Richard John Neuhaus, *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 52-53.
4. *Affluenza*, xviii.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004-2005).
7. *Affluenza*, 4.
8. *Ibid.*, 42.
9. *Ibid.*, 4.
10. Center for a New American Dream, 2004 survey, [www.newdream.org/about/pdfs/PollRelease.pdf](http://www.newdream.org/about/pdfs/PollRelease.pdf).
11. David Myers, *The American Paradox* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 136.
12. Craven, *Uncompromised Faith*, 79.
13. L.C. Sayer, et. All, “Are Parents Investing Less in Children?”, paper presented at the American Sociological

Association annual meeting, August 2000.

14. *Affluenza*, 80.

15. Ibid.

16. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan: NJ: Fleming Revell, 1976), 205.

17. *Affluenza*, 81.

18. Ibid., 83.

19. James Kunstler in discussion with David Wann, March 1997, quoted in *Affluenza*, 65.

© 2009 Probe Ministries