

# Contents

Introduction	11
1. Materialism: Caravans and the Exodus	15
2. Careerism: Reputations and Sandcastles	27
3. Sentimentalism: Old Age, Old Adage, Old Advantage	39
4. Nationalism: Borders and Belief	53
Conclusion	73



## Introduction

This is a book about *nothing*. It is about *nothing* in the same sense that children use the word when caught doing *something* they know they ought not to be. Their ‘nothing’ is really code for ‘something’ they know will get them into trouble, yet they want every adult to think that really it *is* nothing at all. Similarly, this book is about some important issues we would prefer everyone else to think are nothing, in the hope that we can continue doing what we really want. It highlights the more imperceptible sins that Christians in the Western world are particularly prone to in the early twenty-first century.

Before you perhaps dismiss me for getting all self-righteous, I am as every bit imperfect, wilfully disobedient and sinful as anyone else. I am simply a fellow traveller, undeservingly destined for heaven and sustained daily by the abundant and overflowing grace of my great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. What follows then is, of course, an imperfect reaction to these sins.

There are many challenges that every Christian has to face in today’s popular culture. Some are facing these pressures forthrightly and in the public square. Political causes such as the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual

## Different

and Queer) worldview, abortion and euthanasia all deserve carefully nuanced and brave responses. Yet many advocates among such causes look at the church today and, perhaps rightly, accuse it of missing the plank in its own eye. When the world can see legitimate grounds for not listening to the church as it speaks about such things as sexual immorality, then by its own standards the church must seriously take stock.

I of course don't mean that Christians should stand idly by until we dot every biblical 'i' and cross all our doctrinal 't's, saying nothing to culture. Our very understanding of sanctification compels us to be the first to admit that we are not yet the finished product. Where a deep understanding of grace exists in the church, it will always speak from a humbled position. The church is comprised of those who know they are fallen and yet have taken God's offer of forgiveness. Christians should not therefore be slow or embarrassed in crying out for godly repentance and faith, both within their own ranks and outside them as well.

Nevertheless, to go on without listening to the world's responses is surely to shoot ourselves in the foot – theologically, socially and culturally. Therefore one of the most pressing issues confronting us in our engagement with culture and our efforts in evangelism is our own credibility: our credibility as those who ought to be not only enjoying God's good but broken creation here and now, but more importantly focusing on the world that is yet to come. The main burden of this book then is a concern that today's Western Christians worry far more about our credit-ability than we do about our credibility. We worry about our financial, social or own personal emotional capital, while all the time not realising that our spiritual, holy and eternal capital is suffering as a result.

## *Introduction*

Putting this as a question might help: don't Christians today spend an inordinate amount of thought on the things of this world, leaving precious little time to prepare for something far more significant? I worry that our delight in God, through Jesus Christ and by the power of the Spirit, is so anaemic. Given this, no one would ever dare even contemplate becoming a Christian, for all they see is a spiritualised veneer of their own lives as they already are. Why bother becoming a Christian if doing so simply means trying to pretend that you are interested in God and eternity, when in reality your interests lie in this world and the best it has to offer? God would be an accoutrement at best, an inconvenience at worst. There is nothing attractive, compelling, never mind biblical about that – at all.

The topics under scrutiny here are by no means exhaustive. They are, however, ancient and therefore worthy of our consideration. They are the perennial problems that every generation of Christian pilgrims must tackle anew. In this sense, then, I am not intentionally setting out to say anything novel. Rather, I am continuing Moses' tradition of telling God's people to repeatedly remind themselves about the law of the Lord. Interestingly, Moses repeatedly reminded the Israelites of the need to do this not because of the dangers of poverty, but because of the threat that prosperity would pose in the Promised Land (Deut. 6:10–15; 8:6–20; 28:47; 32:15).

Perhaps you will read this and think there really is nothing in it at all. For a large majority of Christians in the world, if they were even able to afford this book, they would not recognise the problems. They live with poverty, face regular persecution and prize heaven far above their few meagre worldly possessions. This book would miss the mark completely for them. However, there are pseudo-gospels preached in such countries that do

## Different

promise these very things I'm debunking and overthrowing. Such health, wealth and prosperity gospels are as out of place in the Bible's story as a champion hotdog eater would be in a local vegan support group.

Alternatively, as you read this, you might ponder whether there is just something in it. For those of you who have already flexed your credit-ability to buy the book, you'll need to decide for yourselves.

# 1

## Materialism: Caravans and the Exodus

### *Coffee, cars and caravans*

I was sitting in my 'office' (aka the best coffee shop in the local area), drinking my 'coffee' (aka my painstakingly blended work of art, called a flat white). As I sat working on next Sunday's sermon, my attention was drawn by a man trying to get his newly purchased, oversized, ultra-HD plasma screen, smart TV into his undersized, newly purchased, eco-friendly, electric-powered, emissions-reducing Smart car! I was suddenly struck that before my eyes was a picture of the struggle that modern people face: to squeeze more and more into our increasingly compact world.

In this struggle we feel we are at least somebody! In the effort to squeeze more and more into our ever increasingly compact world, we think that at least proves we have the purchasing power to do so. 'What a joke,' I thought to myself – from my self-assured, superior vantage point, sipping my rapidly cooling cup of glorified caffeine, typing on my trusty iGod (aka a MacBook Pro).

## Different

Admittedly, a coffee shop is not the best place to have an 'office'. Mine is in the middle of a shopping complex where I can witness the same act of consumerism being played out multiple times in an hour. Yet at the very same time I am uncritically engaging in my own incessant thirst for more. As my coffee house has Wi-Fi, with the simple click of a button I can enter a global megastore where digital shelves are overflowing with products that generally I have absolutely no use for, but apparently I need. A brief search on my Amazon history alone proves that over the course of a year I have been almost oblivious to my attempts to squeeze more and more into my supposedly already Spirit-filled Christian life.

My experience in ministry thus far has confirmed that I am not alone in this. I am actually tempted to venture that it is one of the most dangerous, even fatal, sicknesses that is currently plaguing the church in my own part of the world: Northern Ireland. Regardless of how much we say, and no matter how much we do, when we retreat to our well-furnished, amply provided for lifestyles, it dangerously compromises the power, hope and substance of our message.

For example, I was completely shocked and totally unprepared for my first summer, in 2016, as an official employee of the Church of Ireland. I had had plenty of ministry experience up until then among an inner-city, international, young, vibrant church. I had finished two theology degrees and read enough Puritan literature to feel confident that even though I had not seen every sin imaginable, at least I would be ready for it. But then, to finish my training, I was moved to a respectable, affluent, very comfortable parish. 'What on earth could happen there?' I thought! While the first nine months went swimmingly, though with the same old problems that



### *Materialism: Caravans and the Exodus*

arise in any ministry, out of nowhere I was confronted with one of the dangers of prosperity. With the onset of summer, the church suddenly shrunk. The bustling children's ministry almost evaporated. The car park was actually useable. The bums on pews were afforded plenty of space. And there was an eerie feeling of irrelevancy that descended over the church. Yet the most troubling part of all was its acceptability: being absent from church, not just for two or three weeks but for the entire summer, was simply something that many people did at this time of the year, didn't they?

When I talk about the exodus, I should think back with utter amazement at the powerful working of Almighty God. He conquered the oppressive Egyptian army and delivered his people out of slavery, bringing them into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. Instead, I think of that multitude of vehicles disappearing over the horizon as Christians in their droves disengaged from their church family. They hitched their newly acquired, super-deluxe, solar-powered, extendable, convertible caravan to their superbly shinning, newly valeted SUV. Sadly, I'm not exaggerating here, and all this was done without batting an eyelid about how odd this pursuit of worldly things is for Christians destined, one day, to arrive in heaven in glory.

### ***Culture wars***

It is well documented and acknowledged by many thinking Christians today that 'culture' is difficult to define because it is almost impossible to detect the culture in which you are living. It is simply the air we breathe; the water we depend on; the norms and values that we assume and reinforce by participating in everyday life.

## Different

The local church must live in its culture while being distinctive. This requires a continual critical assessment of its own culture – a tricky and demanding exercise. It must be in the world but not of the world. It must seek to win the world by both affirming what is good and at the very same time condemning what is bad. A church earnestly engaging with its surrounding culture in this way will be noted as being full of grace and yet seasoned with salt. This is part of the mission of every Christian and any faithful church.

The danger is that, perhaps over time, a church can unthinkingly and imperceptibly absorb the values and attitudes of the very culture it was initially trying to challenge and change. The dangerous and pervasive spirit of materialism has suffused itself so successfully into the life of the church that no one seems to worry about it any longer. In this regard we are just like everyone else.

Famously Gordon Gekko pronounced, 'Greed is good'. The church laughs along with its secular neighbour at the crudity of the statement, but in reality we can easily believe either that greed is one of those 'minor' sins that doesn't do anyone that much harm, or that it is a sin we personally are not guilty of committing.

But what of our desire to keep up with the Joneses? Why our insatiable thirst for the latest, must-have phones, watches, tablets and so on? Where does our underlying grumpiness and persistent dissatisfaction with life come from? And why do we find all these things so easy to excuse in ourselves, simply because everyone else is doing it?

### *Keeping the faith*

I must be careful not to fall under the strong condemnation

### *Materialism: Caravans and the Exodus*

of 1 Timothy 4:1–5 at this point. In an attempt to prove their superior spiritual position, some people were troubling the church in Ephesus with teaching that ‘forbid people to marry and order[ed] them to abstain from certain foods’ (v. 3). Yet Paul instructs Timothy that such a prohibition is the teaching of demons – God’s creation is good and to be enjoyed. Marriage and food (two things which I wholeheartedly support) are held up as evidence of the skilful, wise and immensely diverse creativity of God. He made them ‘to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth’.

In other words, Christians are not to be seen by culture as those who avoid the richness of God’s creation. The fine taste of a perfectly cooked steak; the full-bodied flavour of a glass of merlot; the joy of love; the warmth of an embrace between a husband and wife; the great outdoors, where God’s power can be experienced first-hand; the solace of life-long friendships; dare I even mention that initial early morning buzz that caffeine delivers – all these things, along with a trillion other experiences, have come from the infinitely creative and loving heart of a good and generous God. They are not to be shunned or avoided but are, with thankfulness, to be used and celebrated in a way that pleases their Maker.

However, in that very same letter Paul has to warn Timothy too not to chase after the things of this world and especially personal wealth. ‘Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs’ (1 Tim. 6:9–10). This is a healthy corrective to our unhealthy obsessions. Though written almost

## Different

2000 years ago, Paul's word could be an editorial piece for the *Financial Times* warning about the psychological, emotional, physical and above all spiritual power that we attach to money, and that can destroy us in all those ways.

In the very same year that I watched in disbelief as countless Christians disappeared over the horizon for most of the summer, I also experienced the tragic sharp edge of Paul's teaching on the love of money. Jeff (an alias) had arrived at my church completely depressed. His back story was a series of tragic events, but as he himself admitted they all issued from his relentless desire to be rich. He took a punt with his life savings, his family home and numerous loans from his extended family. He then lost absolutely everything. He also lost the patience of everyone who knew him and the trust of those he loved. They did love him, but he had become too toxic to be around as he tried to salvage his dreams of being wealthy. His pursuit of money plunged him into ruin and destruction. As church resumed its autumn schedule, I got a phone call one night to inform me that he had committed suicide.

Please note that it is the *love* of money that is Paul's main concern here. Money in and of itself is neither good nor bad. A certain amount is necessary for living today – poverty is a terrible thing. But neither is being rich necessarily wrong. Some people are born 'into money', or have the natural ability to make lots of it. Others are blessed by people's generosity. Paul's writing is very careful. He has already said that we are to enjoy God's good creation and in 1 Timothy 6 acknowledges that it is perfectly possible to be rich and still live as a real Christian. But what he so forcefully does is to call us all to wake up to the nature of our own hearts. They are built to love, so if we are not loving one thing, we will inexorably be driven to love

## *Materialism: Caravans and the Exodus*

something else. Money is particularly attractive to the desires and longings of all our hearts. This is why if you are poor, money seems to be the answer, and if you are rich, it still seems to be the answer to the dissatisfaction that lies deep within.

This love of money demonstrates itself in a multitude of ways. Very often it is by acquiring more and more things. It can prompt the Facebook posts and Instagram snaps of our latest must-have experiences. It may cause us to associate with new friends because, like them, we can now afford to shop, dine or holiday with the in-crowd.

What we do with our money and how it affects us is a concern. No one can argue that the Bible's teaching on money is irrelevant today. I need to hear such warnings almost on a daily basis. I am far happier to stay in the territory of 1 Timothy 4 where I can comfort myself that by entering into the kaleidoscopic fullness of all that there is to be enjoyed in this world, then at least I am not in danger of promoting the teaching of demons. It is far more complicated and demanding to work out carefully and regularly when my heart is beginning to chase after and be defined by my money or lack thereof.

Could anyone say that you are different from the accepted norms of the world you currently inhabit simply because you are a Christian? To return to my previous example, instead of checking out of your church family for the summer and taking refuge in the comfort of your caravan, chalet or cruise ship, could you actually prioritise being in your church in the holiday months? That sounds like a small and almost inconsequential thing, but in practice it would be a monumental shift for many people. Not only would it teach your heart a valuable lesson, but it would be an example to many others as well. You would be saying, 'Yes, I love my holidays. I need time away from the

## Different

norm simply to look after my body and mental health. At the same time, however, I don't want to miss being fed the spiritual food of God's word. I need that even more and feel the worse for missing it.' Of course some people will protest and say that they go to other churches when they are away. I'm glad they are going to a church somewhere. However, a long-term vacation from your home church – except for genuine reasons such as a short-term mission or ill health – betrays a low view that the people and relationships there are not worth the sacrifice of precious holiday time. This might appear an overstatement, but it is what we do with the time that is really ours that shows us where our hearts truly are. When term time is in full swing, we can simply be carried along by the commitments that demand our time. But when we are free to spend our time as we like, we see where our true commitments lie. If we don't 'have to be' at church, will we still delight to be there? Those who chose to 'take a break' from their church and 'visit' other churches also demonstrate a low view of them. At worst it is spiritual foraging in someone else's field with no intention of contributing long-term to the life of that church. Such 'touring' Christians are in league with those students who church-hop during their university years, consuming a pick-and-mix diet of spiritual sound bites.

You may be thinking that I've gone overboard here. In some sense I'm looking for exactly this reaction, and it proves that I am challenging a cultural norm. I can hear some people say, 'I don't know what David has gotten all worked up over. After all we are only talking about going to church.' But that is precisely my point. Rather than discussing *going to* church, we are addressing what church means and how that should change our attitude towards it.

## *Materialism: Caravans and the Exodus*

The church is not simply a social club that meets the interests of a select few in any particular community. Neither is the church the property of any small group of people with membership cards and voting rights. It is not an alternative source of entertainment, a platform for a political party or person, or a hobby for a few enthusiasts and a take-it-or-leave-it option for your average Christian. The church is the clearest sign to the world that Jesus has indeed been raised from the dead and that all who truly trust in him are destined for glory (Col. 1:18). The church is the unavoidable demonstration of where the history of the entire world is headed, as it willingly submits to Jesus' lordship today (Eph. 1:10). The regular meeting of your local church is the best place to hear and apply the gracious word of the living God (Heb. 12:18–24). The church is what matters most to Jesus (John 21:15–19). The church is the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13–16). To think that any human or group of people might have sole ownership and control of the church is surely a mistake. To have a casual and easy relationship with the church is worse. If your relationship with your church and with the people in your church has no claim on you, your resources and your time, then something is wrong somewhere.

Jesus gives a very clear warning: if there is no (or even just a minor) difference between you and the rest of the world in how you view your financial capital and what you do with your time, Jesus will be hard pushed to recognise you on the ultimate pay day. His 'salty' words are exactly what we need to hear (Matt. 5:13).

### *A matter of trust*

As I mentioned before, the danger for the Israelites in the Promised Land was not from poverty but from prosperity.

## Different

Achan felt the full weight of this warning when he tried accruing for himself some of the trinkets of the other nations (Josh. 7). The same is seen in the New Testament where Ananias and Sapphira tried pretending to be fully invested in the progress of the kingdom when actually they wanted to live with a foot in both worlds (Acts 5). These stories and others repeat the same point: you cannot love both God and money.

The clarion call of this book is to ask who you actually are prepared to trust. This is something that is played out in family homes again and again. Children get annoyed with their parents, they shout and argue, they lie and deceive, they even disobey and do the opposite to what they are being told to do. I've been wrestling with this for some time now with one of our four children. Then I read Paul Tripp's book *Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family* (Crossway Books, 2016). I was struck by how he drew attention to the importance of speaking to our children's hearts. That is where the real problem lies, which as parents we dare not miss. Changing actions may work for a while, but what we should be seeking to address is their attitudes. In applying Tripp's thesis to the bedrock of all the other anti-social problems in my child's behaviour, I saw it to be a matter of trust.

Why do our children shout and lie and disobey? Why do they question, argue over and constantly push the boundaries? And why are parents exhausted, worried and perplexed at the end of another day by the seemingly unchanging actions of their children? The tactic my wife and I now try to adopt when speaking and disciplining our children is to get to their hearts. We help them to see and acknowledge that the reason why they are really struggling to obey us is because they are really



### *Materialism: Caravans and the Exodus*

struggling to trust us as their parents. In turn, even in a loving family environment, that trust needs to be earned.

Exactly the same applies to our relationship with our perfectly loving heavenly Father. Luther is famously attributed to having penned, 'The sin underneath all our sins is to trust the lie of the serpent that we cannot trust the love and grace of Christ and must take matters into our own hands'. In this chapter I have been pushing for a change in our attitude towards our possessions and time. Of course a holiday from our normal routine is good and necessary. Of course some money is essential. We need to be wise in the use of both our time and our money. But above all we need to exercise our trust in God more. We need to trust him that when we sacrificially invest both these resources in his service, we will be acting in the only sensible way for Christians. It may seem strange at first for many of us to do so. Our Christian culture may even attempt to label us as a bit extreme. But that might actually be the very reaction to confirm we are doing something essential.