Reforming *Homo Consumens*: Consumer Culture, Consumerism, and Contemporary Christian Witness

William G. Fredstrom

God's people work, play, live, worship, pray, and witness in cultures and societies with various institutions, problems, ideas, neighbors, and conflicts. Because Christians live within such varying cultural contexts, many desire to maintain a clear distinction between themselves and the cultures in which they live.[1] Theologians have described the distinctiveness of God's people amid their secular cultures by describing the Church as its own culture or public constituted by unique narratives, rituals, and practices that contrast the narratives, rituals, and practices of other surrounding cultures.[2]

On one hand, describing the Church as its own culture preserves the distinctiveness and peculiarity of the Church's proclamation and confession. On the other hand, it muddles the truth that nearly everything that goes on in a church—preaching, teaching, administration, catechesis, and pastoral care—is inadvertently shaped by the various narratives, rituals, and practices present in the cultural milieu where that church is embedded. With this tension in mind, this paper explores how a particular aspect of the North American social imaginary shapes and forms the lives and witness of God's people today: consumer culture and consumerism.[3]

When God's people live in a consumer culture, their understanding of the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church can be malformed.[4] Critically, this paper seeks to show what these malformed understandings might look like in theory and practice. Constructively, by drawing on central themes and insights from Lutheran theology, this paper seeks to demonstrate how a more faithful understanding of the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church helps God's people offer a more beautiful and compelling description of these entities as they witness to their neighbors in our secular age.

First, it is necessary to understand the economic system that enables consumerism to thrive and consider how consumerism, and economics more broadly, has come to function as a religion in our secular age with its own corresponding understanding of justification rooted in identity formation and social distinction.

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Forming Our Imaginations: Neoliberalism, Detachment, and Advertising

Many economists and social commentators contend that the current economic system that dominates the West and the rest of the world is a particular form of capitalism called neoliberalism.[5] Political theorist Wendy Brown has argued that the neoliberal vision of life has captured the imagination of all participants, whether persons or institutions and those with political leanings to the left or right. "The norms and principles of neoliberal rationality do not dictate precise economic policy," Brown writes, "but rather set out novel ways of conceiving and relating state, society, economy, and subject."[6] Neoliberalism cannot simply be reduced to economic policy; instead, it is a more encompassing account of narratives, rituals, and practices that shape and form the imaginations of its participants.

In a neoliberal system of economics, the global market economy is seen as the dominant phenomenon that shapes socio-cultural and political factors in contemporary life.[7] The functional apotheosis of the market has led to what Brown calls "a new 'economization' of heretofore noneconomic spheres and endeavors."[8] To describe the pervasiveness of this new economization concretely, let us briefly consider the goal and purpose of the contemporary university.

Without idealizing or romanticizing an older model of university education rooted in the humanities, the classics, theology, and music, much of this model was seen as personally and socially advantageous. Interacting with the great literature and thinkers of previous eras was meant to sharpen the learner's critical thinking skills and character. However, this model of education is now seen as inconsequential, even a waste of time, energy, and potential. Why?

Much of this change in sentiment is due to the cultural agreement that a student's growth in diverse forms of knowledge and critical thinking skills is far less important than ensuring the student gains a technical proficiency that will allow her to succeed in the marketplace.[9] While universities are contemporary locations of immense ideological and value formation, few values are held in higher esteem than to help students get a "big shovel" in the marketplace when they graduate.

Neoliberalism's story and novel way of imagining the world can be observed in the ascendency and dominance of consumer culture. Many have argued that consumer culture brought about a historically unprecedented attachment to material objects. In a sense this is true, but it is not the whole story. People do not simply want things; they want *different* things and *more* of them. Theologian William Cavanaugh argues that "What really characterizes consumer culture is not attachment to things but detachment. People do not hoard money; they spend it. People do not cling to things; they discard them and buy other things."[10] Things are desired, acquired, and then discarded to make room for new desires and acquisitions. As a result, consumerism is not so much about having but having something else. "It is not simply *buying*," Cavanaugh writes, "but *shopping* that is at the heart of consumerism."[11] The desire for more is always present because "possession kills desire; familiarity breeds

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contempt."[12] But how are these desires created and put into the hearts and minds of the consumer? Advertising.

Canadian humorist Stephen Butler Leacock has said, "Advertising is the art of arresting the human intelligence just long enough to get money from it." But advertising has a more purposeful goal than this. Advertising seeks to convince the consumer that the advertised product can actually change her life.[13] More often than not, advertisers present a product as something that will fill the consumer's life with meaning and hope in an otherwise mundane, boring, and even painful life.[14] In 2022, consumers spent 9.12 billion dollars online shopping on Black Friday.[15] Clearly, the desire to fill "the aching void" through material objects is alive and well in our secular age.

But why is the clutch of consumerism so great? Why do we consume the way we do, even if we know intuitively and from experience that things do not ultimately bring happiness or fulfillment? Why do people often look to their belongings as their source of meaning, identity, and security? Sociologically and historically speaking, the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society, from a Fordist to a post-Fordist society, and the move from a production to a consumer society are all necessary to describe how we have arrived at our contemporary social imaginary.[16]

However, the following section focuses on another set of reasons that help us understand the all-encompassing formative power of consumer culture and consumerism by describing how economics and consumerism have come to function as a religion in our secular age with its own corresponding understanding of justification rooted in identity formation and social distinction.

"Religion" in A Secular Age: Economics, Consumerism, and Justification by Distinction

Few theoretical accounts have described the cultural underpinnings and assumptions of the contemporary West with such erudition and persuasiveness as Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age.*[17] Taylor wonders, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000, many of us find this not only easy but even inescapable?"[18] To answer this question, Taylor weaves a lengthy story describing several critical transitions concerning the self, society, the natural world, and God over the past 500 years in the West.

Central to this transition is how the conception of the self has changed from *porous*, or vulnerable to divine grace, action, and outside forces, to *buffered*, or turned inward, no longer vulnerable to transcendent forces, and able to set "its own autonomous order to its life."[19] The buffered self is essential for establishing what Taylor calls "exclusive humanism," an understanding of the self and society wherein "fullness" and flourishing is found solely in this-worldly objects and goals *apart* from any transcendent horizon or source, i.e., God.

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Another critical transition Taylor describes is the great disembedding of Western society. Before this period in history, almost every person in the West assumed they were embedded in society, that society fit into the wider cosmos, and that the cosmos incorporates the divine.[20] However, the great disembedding led to a new understanding of reality wherein human persons began to imagine a life disembedded from the social order, and the social order began to be seen as untethered from the cosmos, all of which was believed to be distanced, even separated, from God. The result was a great disenchantment—a supernatural or transcendent explanation was no longer necessary to explain the workings of the natural world.[21]

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Concurrent with this great disembedding was the rise of providential Deism. Providential Deism effectively eclipsed the need for divine grace, faded divine mystery, and emptied divine providence.[22] The social dissolutions of these core Christian tenets led to a cultural setting where belief in God became easier to disregard and dismiss.

The understanding of the self as buffered instead of porous, the great disembedding, and the rise of providential Deism were all significant philosophical shifts that brought about the West's anthropocentric turn that led to fullness and flourishing being reduced to a this-worldly reality centered in economic mutual benefit.[23] Because of this, Taylor argues that Western culture has undergone the process of "immanentization," wherein people seek "meaning, significance, and 'fullness' within a closed, self-sufficient naturalistic universe without any reference to transcendence."[24]

An implication of an immanentized understanding of reality is that belief in the Triune God is no longer easy or axiomatic. While the sense in which the West has grown less religious in our secular age has been debated, it is clear that for many the objects of religious devotion and faith have migrated. Instead of finding salvation in a transcendent God who makes Himself known through His Son Jesus Christ, many now seek a sort of salvation in the acquisition and preservation of this-worldly things. To say that secularism caused consumerism is far too simplistic an assertion; however, as people look to fill the place of God in a secular age, consumerism is an obvious alternative. Therefore, as the social imaginary of the West has broadly come to accept the assumptions of the immanent frame with its eclipse of the transcendent; various social theorists, theologians, and economists have described how economics and consumerism have begun to function as a religion in our secular age with its own corresponding understanding of justification rooted in identity formation and social distinction.

One compelling description of this transition is from theologian Scott Gustafson's book *At the Altar of Wall Street: The Rituals, Myths, Theologies, Sacraments, and*

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Mission of the Religion Known as the Modern Global Economy. His central argument is that "economics functions in our current global culture as religions have functioned in other cultures."[25] Gustafson supports this thesis by demonstrating how modern global economics has pilgrimage sites like Walt Disney World and sacred places like shopping malls. It has prophets like Adam Smith and Karl Marx and core doctrines like "The Invisible Hand" and "The Efficient Market Theory." It can turn people into disciples by making them into consumers, and it even has the power to create new persons: the corporation.[26] Finally, it has a global mission to create more and more capital whenever and wherever possible.

Drawing on Luther's explanation of the First Commandment, Gustafson argues, "For many, the benefits we receive from The Economy truly are 'that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need.' This being so, the Economy is our God and Economics is a religion."[27] Whether or not one agrees with all of Gustafson's analysis, his work provides a plausible and persuasive account that describes how economics has come to function as a religion in our secular age.

Another scholar who has done substantial work to make the case that economics functions as a contemporary religion is non-Christian economist Robert Nelson. Contra many economists who see economics as more of a value-neutral science, Nelson argues, "Modern economics offers its own worldview, one that stands in sharp contrast to the Christian worldview."[28] In *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics*, Nelson, quoting economist Peter Boettke, contends that economics has become "the modern theology that . . . replaced traditional theology as the set of doctrines that give meaning to our social reality and hope to our endeavors of improving our lives."[29] In Nelson's analysis, the ascendency of the secular imagination did not result in the end of religion but the rise of a new religion of economic progress in which economists serve as the high priests.[30]

To illustrate the rise of the religion of economic progress, Nelson shows how economists like John Bates Clark (1847–1938) once referred to God shaping and guiding the economy toward "an increasingly just state of affairs leading, eventually, to God's kingdom." However, over time, Clark replaced the reference to God with categories like "natural law." Once the transition to natural law was made, the scientific quest to recover these laws began to take place, and reference to God became optional. These transitions helped establish an ersatz salvation story where the market's "invisible hand" was assumed to effectively replace God's all-powerful providential hand.[31]

Finally, a comprehensive and instructive description of consumerism as religion is given by theologian Jay McDaniel:

> As a religion, consumerism is even more powerful than scientism, and its influence holds sway in many circles that are antagonistic or indifferent to science. We might characterize the religion as follows. Its god is economic growth for its own sake; its priests are the public policy makers who provide access to growth; its evangelists are the advertisers who display the products of growth and try to convince us that we cannot be happy without them; and its church is the shopping mall. Its primary creeds are 'bigger is better' and

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> 'more is better' and 'faster is better' and 'you can have it all.' Its doctrine of creation is that the earth is real estate to be bought and sold in the marketplace. Its doctrine of human existence is that we are skin-encapsulated egos, cut off from the world by the boundaries of our skin. And the doctrine of salvation is that we are saved—or made whole—not by grace through faith as Christians claim or by wisdom through letting go as Buddhists claim, but by appearance, affluence, and marketable achievement.[32]

McDaniel helpfully describes how the religion of consumerism draws parasitically on core tenets of Christianity. In our secular age, the shell of the Christian story and surrounding doctrines have not necessarily been forgotten. Yet, the content, characters, problems, resolutions, and even the nature of justification have been re-narrated to arrive at a radically different religious account altogether.

Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer argues that the need to justify oneself is a perennial human phenomenon known to all cultures and peoples after the fall into sin.[33] This need to justify oneself is also present in a consumer culture in the need to measure up or outdo others through the acquisition of material things.[34] This pattern was observed in 1899 by sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen, who famously coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption."[35] Conspicuous consumption is often now called "keeping up with the Joneses."

A dominant way people seek to justify themselves before others is through the single-family home. A home is a place of shelter, a place to raise families, and a place to experience leisure and recreation. But the home has also become essential for justifying oneself in a consumer culture. Few things signal personal success and engender social distinction like a new, large, well-kept, and beautiful home.[36] Besides the home, numerous consumer experiences and goods serve similar justifying functions, like vacations, cars, or the latest technological gadgets. Theologian Daniel Bell Jr. has aptly labeled this trend "justification by distinction."[37]

Essential to note is that consumer culture is not driven merely by crass materialism or hedonism, but, as Bell writes, "This effort at justification by distinction is a matter of identity or recognition."[38] In a consumer culture, the emphasis is less on possessing and hoarding "and more about the constant and endless acquisition of novelties for the sake of distinguishing oneself, for the sake of appearance, of being recognized as valuable in the eyes of the market, and hence, in the eyes of others."[39] As theorist Guy Debord famously puts it, we live in "the society of the spectacle," where identity creation and social distinction are two of the most significant commodities.

As we consider our Christian witness to neighbors in our secular age, we must keep in mind that we can only understand the all-encompassing formative power of consumer culture and consumerism if we see that what undergirds it is not merely greed or misplaced desire but an implicit, though comprehensive and coherent, religious account with its own corresponding understanding of justification, which can malform the understanding of some of the Christian faith's central tenets, like the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church.[40]

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Malformed Understandings: The Individual, Neighbor, God, and Church in a Consumer Culture

In a consumer culture, René Descartes' famous anthropological maxim, "I think, therefore I am," has been replaced with a new phrase: "I consume, therefore I am." This replacement comes with significant anthropological implications. *Homo consumens* is primarily an individual shaped by her own autonomous reason, desires, tastes, preferences, and values. While the consuming individual should not be thought to consume in isolation from neighbors or family members, the individual's desires, tastes, and values dominate consumptive decisions. Thus, *homo consumen*s is turned in on herself, focused on her own achievements and possessions, while ironically always in need of validation and justification from her neighbors and peers. Yet, no matter how much is consumed and acquired, the desire for more is often present.

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That individuals in a consumer society often seek worth and identity through money, possessions, and personal appearances has been described by theorist Guy Debord in his work, *The Society of the Spectacle*: "Just as early industrial capitalism moved the focus of existence from being to having, post-industrial culture has moved that focus from having to appearing."[41] Questions of ultimate truth ("being"), character, and moral virtue matter little for *homo consumens*. What does matter is how much the individual has ("having") and how these make that individual appear to others ("appearing"). Moreover, in a sexualized and social-media-driven culture, "appearing" refers to both the possession of consumer goods and the commodification of the body. The body and its appearance need constant physical maximization through restrictive dieting and fitness, Botox, and plastic surgery, as well as editing, airbrushing, and applying the perfect filter for the purpose of being seen as a commodity worth consuming.[42]

Consumer culture also influences one's understanding of the neighbor. In a consumer culture, relationships among neighbors can deteriorate into competition. As theologian Rodney Clapp argues, "neoliberalism sees people as individuals existing at the behest of the market, pitted in competition against one another."[43] Corporations compete to construct and produce the "next best thing," a pattern that also informs how neighbors understand and relate to one another. If someone acquires a new object of desire, neighbors often seek to measure up or outdo each other through the

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acquisition of an even newer and better object of desire. This phenomenon is called "competitive consumption."

Such an understanding of the neighbor negates the pursuit of "the common good" and the celebration of others' accomplishments and acquisitions without greed or envy. Additionally, vulnerability, social interdependency, and solidarity are not seen as virtues but as weaknesses to be exploited.[44] As Clapp points out, this logic is ingrained into consumers through reality television shows like *The Apprentice*, *The Bachelor*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Naked and Afraid*, and several others. These shows portray an all-out competition among neighbors, eventually leading to the ascendency of a winner. Viewers are taught to identify with the winner and to see the other neighbors as losers, even if there is a tinge of sympathy concerning their fate.

An even more problematic example of this phenomenon is pseudo-therapeutic television shows like *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Dr. Phil.* On these shows, viewers often watch lower income families and individuals divulge family secrets, affairs, and personal pains to the world, all so the viewer can look upon these people and gain a sense of self-validation at their expense: "Well, I'm not doing great, but thank God I'm not doing as bad as those people!"[45]

The competitive view of the neighbor often goes hand in hand with a utilitarian view of the neighbor. In a consumer-oriented culture, the neighbor is often viewed as a means to an end, rather than an end in herself. The neighbor's value is reduced to what she can do for me, rather than a wholistic appreciation for the neighbor as a creature of God with various gifts, talents, and responsibilities. This understanding of the neighbor can also have disastrous ramifications for building vulnerable relationships and cultivating social capital. Basing the neighbors' value on "what they can do for me" also undergirds how God is understood in a consumer culture.

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In a consumer culture, God is only considered valuable according to what He can do for the individual. In his book, *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God*, Christian pastor Skye Jethani describes several postures a person can take in her relationship with God. One dominant posture is "from" God. This posture, Jethani writes, "fueled by our consumer culture," conceives of a relationship in which God exists to supply what we desire.[46] He goes on to explain why this posture is so appealing today:

> The life from God posture is so appealing because it doesn't ask us to change. What we desire, what we seek, what we do, and how we live—all shaped by consumerism—are not disrupted. Our values and way of life are simply projected onto God and incorporated into a religious system in which

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> we receive divine assistance to meet our desires. In this way, life from God is nothing more than consumerism with a Jesus sticker slapped on the bumper.[47]

The formative power of consumerism to malform our understanding of God is significant. Sociologist Christian Smith has shown how this sort of consumeristic logic has helped create and inform a new de facto religion in North America, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."[48]

The creed of this quasi-religion confesses a sort of God who wants people to be good and kind (moralistic), happy and safe (therapeutic), but is uninvolved in people's day-to-day life (deism).[49] The result is a God who is essentially like a "Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist."[50]

In this understanding, God does not demand anything traditionally associated with Christian discipleship, nor does He work salvation from sin, death, and the devil, but instead serves as the divine fulfiller of the consumer's greatest hopes and desires.[51] And as the Head goes, the body is soon to follow.

In a consumer culture, the church can be understood as another peddler of ideas and values in the marketplace. In his work, *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger describes why this understanding of religious institutions emerged. With the rise of religious and philosophical pluralism, religious institutions lost authority as the tacit belief system in society. Berger puts this way:

> Allegiance [to a religious institution] is voluntary and, thus, by definition, less than certain. As a result, the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be *marketed*. It must be "sold" to a clientele that is no longer constrained to "buy." The pluralistic situation is, above all, a *market situation*. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities. And at any rate, a good deal of religious activity in this situation comes to be dominated by the logic of religious economics.[52]

Berger's analysis in 1969 seems almost prophetic when considering all that has happened in the proceeding decades up to the present day. His insights foreshadow the work and assertions of those like George Barna, who writes, "Like it or not, the church is not only in a market but is itself a 'business.' It has a 'product' to sell—a relationship with Jesus and others. Its 'core product' is the message of salvation, and each local church is a franchise."[53] Berger's analysis also reveals the foundation for the ascendency of the church marketing and church shopping movements of the past few decades.

In other words, Christian churches in consumer cultures have become commodities to be consumed in the marketplace. As a result, the church has not only become "economized," but its purpose and function, according to societal thought, can be reduced to serving the desires, preferences, and tastes of the consuming individual.

David Platt describes this "me-oriented" understanding of the church in his New York Times bestseller, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*:

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> Therefore, when I look for a church, I look for the music that best fits *me* and the programs that best cater to *me* and *my* family. When I make plans for *my* life and career, it is about what works best for *me* and *my* family. . . . This is the version of Christianity that largely prevails in our culture.[54]

If the purpose of the church is to fulfill a person's hopes and aspirations with a religious veneer, the preaching, teaching, worship, and parish activities must be seen as attractive and rarely, if ever, at odds with the broader cultural assumptions and values, including those of consumer culture. Preaching can become a reminder that God "takes you as you are and will give you what you desire," not an address that calls the hearer to turn from their sinful ways, repent, be forgiven, and by the Holy Spirit's power, strive to live according to God's design and desire for human creaturely life.[55] Moreover, in a consumer culture, the church's radical call to discipleship is also minimized as the church is reduced to a mere commodity that helps people fulfill their physical, material, and therapeutic desires.

In North American consumer culture, faithful understanding of the individual, the neighbor, and God can be malformed. However, when God's people are aware of these theological misunderstandings, they are better equipped to be on guard against them both communally and personally. They are also better positioned to offer a more beautiful, compelling, and faithful description of Christian doctrine in their witness to neighbors in our secular age. The following section seeks to sketch a more faithful description of these tenets by drawing on key themes from Lutheran theology, such as human creatureliness, justification by faith, the theology of the cross, and Luther's eucharistic ecclesiology.

Towards a More Faithful, Compelling, and Beautiful Description: The Individual, Neighbor, God, and the Church

In the beginning, the triune God, the Creator of heaven and earth, made man and woman in His image. What Christians understand and assume about the individual and the neighbor must be rooted in this central confession. Martin Luther offers this creaturely understanding of the individual in his explanation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism: "I believe in God the Father Almighty: What does this mean? I believe that God has made me and all creatures . . ." At the heart of a Christian understanding of the individual is, "I am a creature of God."

Lutheran theologian Charles Arand has argued that to be a creature is to recognize that the individual is contingent, dependent, and accountable to God.[56] As a creature, the individual does not have life in herself. The individual creature has been carefully knit together by God in her mother's womb (Ps 139:13–4) and continues to be preserved and protected by God as He gives and provides daily bread. The individual creature is also accountable to live according to the Creator's design and desire for human creaturely life.

However, the individual creature does not naturally seek to live according to the Creator's will. The individual creature does not want to be contingent or dependent on

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God but wants to be like God. This is most clearly seen when God's human creatures kill Jesus, the incarnate Creator of heaven and earth. Nevertheless, God raised Jesus from the dead. Following His resurrection, Jesus ascended to the Father's right hand as both God and a human creature and, in so doing, restored our creatureliness.[57] When a person is justified by faith in Jesus Christ through baptism, she is restored to the relationship God intended for His individual human creatures: living in faith toward God by receiving His gifts and trusting His promises, and living in love toward the neighbor through obedience and service.

Some might contend that being considered a creature is demeaning and insulting; however, being a creature of God is a far more meaningful way to live than the endless cycle of having and appearing in a consumer culture. Justified by faith, the individual is released from the burden of trying to be seen as "having enough" or appearing "beautiful enough." Because God has justified the sinner and calls her his own, she is made beautiful by his love and given a treasure that moths and rust cannot destroy.

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This creaturely understanding of the individual also has significant implications for relationships with neighbors, and provides a far more beautiful and compelling understanding of the neighbor than can be found in consumer culture. In a consumer culture, the relationship with neighbors can often center on competition over social status and distinction. However, for a person to find her identity as a creature of God is to recognize that she lives among other creatures and is dependent upon them, responsible for them, and called to rejoice and lament with them.

Lutheran theology confesses that God works *through* His creatures *for* His creatures. This means that creatures are dependent on one another. For instance, when Christians pray that God would grant daily bread, God answers this prayer. But God does not answer it by dropping food out of the sky. God answers this prayer by working *through* farmers, truckers, warehouse employees, and grocery store workers to give daily bread *to* His creatures *for* their well-being. This example is a microcosm of how God works through His creatures and how His creatures must work on behalf of one another for the mutual flourishing of creaturely life on earth. Instead of constant competition, a creaturely understanding of neighbors reveals a divine economy of mutual dependency and responsibility arranged by God for the well-ordering and functioning of life within His creation.

A creaturely understanding of the neighbor also means that neighbors are responsible for one another (Gal 6:2). As God's justified people strive to live in accord with God's will for His creation, they are called to protect and defend one another's life and well-being, and also to protect and defend the life of their spouse and family, property, assets, and reputation. As a result, relationships among neighbors are not

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detached; rather, they are responsible and full of Christ-like sacrificial service for the well-being of the neighbor (Phil 2:1–11).

Finally, a creaturely understanding of the neighbor frees neighbors from the burden of competitive consumption. Having been freed from "keeping up with the Joneses" by being justified by faith in Jesus Christ, neighbors are free to rejoice with those who are doing well and lament and pray with those who are struggling (Rom 12:15). Thus, creaturely life is not characterized by winners and losers but by solidarity and charity among mutually dependent and responsible neighbors, who, by the Holy Spirit's power, come to practice contentment, generosity, and mercy as they have been justified by faith in the triune God.

The identity and purpose of God in a consumer culture bear strikingly little resemblance to the identity and purpose of the triune God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. In a consumer culture, God can quickly be understood as a cosmic vending machine that satisfies personal desires and needs. However, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus is not a cosmic butler or therapist whose sole purpose is to bring about the desiring individual's happiness, but the Almighty God who created all things out of nothing by His Word, and who gives Himself freely as a gift through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

One of Luther's key distinctions comes from his Heidelberg Disputation (1518), where he distinguishes between a theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross. A theologian of glory wants glory for herself. She wants success, acclaim, victory, power, and a God who can actualize these hopes and desires. The understanding of God as a divine butler and therapist in a consumer culture is the God of a theologian of glory. However, Lutheran theologian Robert Kolb helpfully describes Luther's concerns with such an understanding of God and why it should also concern us:

> Luther found these theologies of glory inadequate and insufficient, ineffective, and impotent. For such a theology of glory reaches out for a manipulable God, a God who provides support for a human creature who seeks to master life on his or her own, with just a touch of divine help. That matched neither Luther's understanding of God nor his perception of his own humanity. Theologians of glory create a god in their own image and a picture of the human creature after their own longings. Neither corresponds to reality, Luther claimed.[58]

The God of consumer culture cannot deal with pains and suffering of creaturely life under the bondage of sin. The God of consumer culture is of no help when bankruptcy comes, the house is foreclosed, or the business falters. But a theologian of the cross recognizes that God is known and found in a radically unexpected way: in and through suffering and the cross. At first, this understanding of God appears weak and foolish; however, the theology of the cross faithfully describes how God is strong to save and why God is a present help in times of trouble, and here is where we arrive at a far more beautiful and compelling understanding of God than can be found in the understanding of God in consumer culture.

In Jesus Christ, we come to know the God who offers forgiveness from guilt, honor in a culture of shame, and peace amid a world of anxiety. Moreover, this same

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God shares the pains and sufferings of His human creatures and bears them in His love. By His incarnation, death, and resurrection, Jesus has done something about evil, sin, and suffering forever. On the cross, Jesus atoned for the whole world's sins, but He also took the world's sins, evil, pain, and suffering into Himself (Is 53:3–5). Jesus "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" and is with His people in their pain and suffering on this side of the resurrection through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments in the church to forgive, strengthen, and form His people.[59]

In a consumer culture, the church is understood to be another commodity to consume in the marketplace that helps people fulfill their material and therapeutic needs. This understanding of the church is "me-centered" and ignores what God is doing in and through the church through His Word. As a result, the understanding of the church in a consumer culture loses its distinctive identity and purpose, both of which are established and enacted by God Himself.

The church is not a business or commodity to be consumed but a creature of the Word (*creatura Verbi*) and the place of God's gracious presence and activity—a place where He speaks to His creatures.[60] God is present everywhere but knowing where Christ is present *pro nobis* and *pro me* is essential. Luther writes that God "has set down for us a definite way to show us how and where to find him, namely the Word."[61] "Because," Luther explains, "it is one thing if God is present, and another if he is present for you. He is there for you when he adds his Word and binds himself, saying, 'Here you are to find me.'"[62] In the church, where the Word is rightly preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered, Christ is present for the blessing and benefit of His people.

Unlike the consumeristic understanding of the church's message, the true message of the church is not one of mere therapeutic affirmation but the address of God that kills, makes alive, and brings forth a new way of life in the Holy Spirit. In the church, the Holy Spirit works through the written Word of God and the spoken Word of the preacher to effect repentance and faith when and where He wills. Through the preaching of the law, we creatures are convicted of our sinful rebellion against God's design and desires for us, and, by the Spirit's power, we come to agree with God's judgment upon us.[63]

Yet through the preaching of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit creates faith, which grabs hold of the promise of forgiveness and a new identity in Jesus Christ. Through the proclamation of the Word in the church, God provides nothing less than a death and resurrection in the creature. As the creature is forgiven and made new by the powerful Word of Jesus in the waters of baptism, she is brought into the body of Christ, the communion of saints, the one, holy, Christian church.

In a consumer culture, the church might be perceived as "me-centered," rooted in what the church can do for the individual. However, a more faithful understanding of the church is communal, participatory, and "neighbor-oriented." Lutheran theologian David S. Yeago describes how justification by faith is not individualistic; rather, it means being brought into the community of the church:

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> Justification by faith is not, for Luther, the establishment of a private individual relationship to God, which may subsequently find expression in adherence to the church. Justification is incorporation into the communal priesthood of the church, into the unity of the Body of Christ with its head . . . sharing in the hidden mystery of the church's union with Christ takes place in, with, and through participation in the church's common life and its holy practices.[64]

Justified by faith, the human creature is made a member of the Body of Christ, connected to Jesus the Head. Luther clearly articulates the creature's connection to the Head and other members of the Body of Christ in his treatise on the Lord's Supper, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Christ, and the Brotherhoods (1519)."[65]

"All the saints," Luther writes, "are members of Christ and of the church, which is a spiritual and eternal city of God."[66] To be a member of this eternal city is to share the community's spiritual possessions, which "become the common property of him who receives this sacrament."[67] This includes especially sharing one another's sufferings and blessings: "In this sacrament," Luther writes, "[the believer] is thus united with Christ and his saints and has all things in common . . . Christ's sufferings and life are his own, together with the lives and sufferings of all the saints."[68] As a result, the suffering of one citizen in this eternal city is suffering to all, and the blessing to one is a blessing to all.

In this treatise, Luther's eucharistic ecclesiology helps us grasp a more beautiful and compelling description of the Church than how those in a consumer culture often perceive the Church. The "me-centered" understanding of the Church, which exists to fulfill one's physical, material, and therapeutic desires, gives way to a "neighbor-oriented" understanding of the Church rooted in solidarity, fellowship, and mutual service through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Christians' understanding, practice, and descriptions of certain aspects of their faith are inevitably molded by the various cultures and societies in which they live, work, worship, and witness. This paper has explored how a particular aspect of the North American social imaginary—consumer culture and consumerism—shapes and forms the lives and witness of God's people.

In our secular age, consumerism functions as a religion with its own corresponding understanding of justification, which can malform how people understand certain central Christian tenets, like the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church. Drawing on various themes and insights from Lutheran theology, this paper has offered more faithful ways for God's people to describe and speak about the individual, the neighbor, God, and the Church. By learning how these central Christian tenets can be malformed in a consumer culture, God's people are better equipped to be on guard against them personally and communally, and they are in a better position

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to offer a more beautiful, compelling, and faithful description of them in their witness to neighbors.

Endnotes

[1] Not all Christians desire this distinctiveness from the surrounding culture(s). For instance, H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* describes a five-fold typology to conceptually explore how various sorts of Christians have tried to relate to culture. It is also true that some circumstances should invite individual Christian or parishes to be distinct from the cultures in which they live, whereas at other times these same Christians might learn something from the cultures in which they are embedded. For a discussion of the various ways the Church can engage culture, see Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 20–42, 93–110.
[2] Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 16–18. Bretherton refers to "ecclesial-turn" theologians like John Milbank, William T. Cavanaugh, and Oliver O'Donovan as representatives of this tradition. For important critiques of this tradition, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 93–119 and Nicholas M. Healy "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (November 2003): 287–308, https://doi.org/10.1111/1463-1652.00110.
[3] Practical theologian Joyce Ann Mercer gives a helpful working definition of consumer culture and consumerism in *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 73. Mercer, quoted in Terri M. Elton, writes, "'Consumerism' refers to a way of life structured by and around various practices of consumption and accumulation. In a consumerist society, consumption dominates social practices, such that relationships, activities, space, work, and leisure come to be structured around various practices related to consumption. Consumption becomes a way to achieve social solidarity—relational connections with others, even as it also marks identity and status." "The Story We Find Ourselves In: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture," *Word and World* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 168–177, 171. However, I would argue that the practices and logic of consumerism and consumption do not primarily bring "social solidarity," but "social competition."
[4] While this essay explores how these problems take particular shape in a North American consumer culture, they are not unique to it. These same problems materialize and emerge in less consumer-oriented societies, as well.
[5] For helpful summaries on the relationship between neoliberalism and Christian theology, see Kevin Hargaden, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: Confronting the Christian Problem with Wealth* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018) and Rodney Clapp, *Naming Neoliberalism: Exposing the Spirit of Our Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021).
[6] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015), 50.
[7] This does not mean that ideas, political parties, or institutions do not shape the assumptions of the societies in which they are present, but a neoliberal understanding often contends that the market economy shapes the logic of these other entities.
[8] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 50.
[9] John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 39.

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[10] William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 34.
[11] Cavanaugh, 35.
[12] Cavanaugh, 47.
[13] Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion*: *Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 87.
[14] Robert Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979), 72.
[15] Mike Snyder, "$9.12 Billion Spent in a Day: New Black Friday Online Spending Record Set in 2022, Report Says," *USA TODAY*, November 26, 2022, https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/shopping/2022/11/26/black-friday-2022-online-sales-record/10780279002/.
[16] "Social imaginary" is a term drawn from the work of Charles Taylor that describes how people imagine the world functions. It refers to the beliefs, practices, expectations, and assumptions that members of society share that shape their day-to-day life and that provides the logic or rules for how they act and think. It is often implicitly present in people's lives rather than explicit and pre-conscious rather than conscious. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) and *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23–24.
[17]For a helpful summary and discussion of *A Secular Age*, see James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014).
[18] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.
[19] Taylor, 38–39.
[20] Taylor, 152.
[21] Taylor, 446.
[22] Taylor, 222–223.
[23] Taylor, 177.
[24] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 141.
[25] Scott W. Gustafson, *At the Altar of Wall Street: The Rituals, Myths, Theologies, Sacraments, and Mission of the Religion Known as the Modern Global Economy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 9.
[26] For a treatment of corporations as people, see Gustafson, *At the Altar of Wall Street*, 89–107. The idea of corporate personhood is not new in contemporary economics. However, it has received significant attention since the 2010 Supreme Court's ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. Corporate personhood does not refer to those people who work for corporations but describes how corporations are now treated as legal persons, though not human persons, with certain legal rights as described in the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution.
[27] Gustafson, 9.
[28] Robert H. Nelson, "The Theology of Economics," in *Faithful Economics: The Moral Worlds of a Neutral Science* eds., James W. Henderson and John Pisciotta (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005): 89–108. For a critique of economics as a neutral science, see William T. Cavanaugh, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Departments of Economics" in *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 55–73.
[29] Robert H. Nelson, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics* (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 342.

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[30] Robert H. Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014). See also, Nelson, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth*, xxi–ii, where he writes, "The history of the modern age reveals a widely held belief that economic progress will solve not only practical but also spiritual problems of mankind."
[31] Nelson, *Economics as Religion*, 102.
[32] Jay McDaniel, "Spirituality and Sustainability," *Conservation Biology* 16, no. 6 (2002): 1462–63.
[33] Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 1–8.
[34] David Zahl, *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, And Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do about It* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), xi–1. Zahl explores how the concept of "enoughness" and the yearning to be seen as "beautiful enough," "rich enough," or "hard-working enough" are all examples of the continued need to justify oneself in the eyes of others in a secular age.
[35] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008), 48–49, 55.
[36] For a discussion of the importance of the single-family home in a consumer culture, see Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 47–70 and Albert Y. Hsu, *The Suburban Christian: Finding Spiritual Vitality in the Land of Plenty* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006), 32–40.
[37] Daniel M. Bell Jr, *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 118.
[38] Bell, *The Economy of Desire*, 119–120
[39] Bell, 120.
[40] Again, the longing to be justified through various philosophies of life or religions is not unique to North America or a consumer culture. It is a fundamental human problem that is present in many other contexts and cultures.
[41] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone, 1994).
[42] The body as a commodity also has a more sinister side, as can be observed through the illegal sex and organ trade; see Stephen Wilkinson, *Bodies for Sale: Ethics and Exploitation in the Human Body Trade* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[43] Clapp, *Naming Neoliberalism*, 33.
[44] Clapp, 52.
[45] Clapp, 53.
[46] Skye Jethani, *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 65.
[47] Jethani, *With*, 65.
[48] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162.
[49] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162.
[50] Smith and Denton, 165.
[51] Smith and Denton, 163–164
[52] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; repr. New York: Anchor, 1969), 138. Emphasis in original.
[53] George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Told You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs: Navpress Publishing Group, 1988), 13.

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[54] David J. Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), 70.
[55] John W. Wright, *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007). Wright distinguishes between "therapeutic" and "tragic" preaching to describe how contemporary preaching can quickly become a mere therapeutic affirmation instead of an address of God that reforms the hearer's world to be in conformity to God's will.
[56] Charles P. Arand, "Back to the Beginning: Creation Shapes the Whole Story," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 132–147, 134–135.
[57] Arand, "Back to the Beginning," 135.
[58] Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 443–446, 448.
[59] See Gene Edward Veith Jr. and A. Trevor Sutton, *Authentic Christianity: How Lutheran Theology Speaks to a Postmodern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 118–121.
[60] Concerning the Church as born by the Word of God, see "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520," LW 36:107.
[61] "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ against the Fanatics, 1526," LW 36:342.
[62] "That These Words . . . 'This is my body,' 1527," LW 37:68.
[63] Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jensen (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 5–8.
[64] David S. Yeago, "'A Christian Holy People': Martin Luther on Salvation and the Church," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 1 (January 1997): 101–120, 116.
[65] "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body, and the Brotherhoods, 1519," LW 35:52. See also Michael L. Laffin's discussion of this text in *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology: Freeing Luther From the Modern Political Narrative* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 79–86.
[66] LW 35:51.
[67] LW 35:51.
[68] LW 35:52.

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