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The Voodoo We All Do

How our shopping habits undermine our witness

After an intense three-year conversation about stewardship and finances (admittedly with a few breaks for food and naps), my husband and I had an “aha” moment one evening as we were considering options to replace our soon-to-be-relinquished leased vehicle.

“What would happen,” I asked him, “if we bought a car we could afford?”

I meant the whole purchase price, not just the car payment. Later that week, we drove home in an eight-year-old minivan, for which we had written a check for \$2,800. It was a moment of freedom.

Not too long afterwards, I was at a mall with a friend and found some

red shoes I wanted. Yes, I could afford them. Yes, I thought, they would make me happy—maybe not for eternity, but at least for a day or two.

I didn’t buy the shoes. Other questions kept crowding in. Do I need the shoes? Is there anything better I could do with this \$37? Don’t I already have a pair of red shoes? And, finally, whose \$37 is it anyway?

Nothing in my Christian upbringing had really prepared me to ask or answer those questions. The Christianity I was raised with seemed as much at home in the mall as in the church. All of the biblical voices for compassion and justice—the prophetic words directed at Israel’s greed and Jesus’s concern for the poor and oppressed—seem to have been edited out of my pink New Testa-

ment. My Jesus was always invited to the mall with me, and in my world, he was always happy to be there.

Greg Boyd, a former pastor of ours, once preached about the problem of syncretism—combining several religious faiths—that happened in Haiti. Missionaries there found that Haitians were combining the good news of the gospel with traditional voodoo religion. Follow-up efforts in Haiti and in other countries have required a presentation of the gospel in which Jesus alone brings hope and salvation, with no room left over for the competing demands of animism or ancestor worship or voodoo.

My experience with consumerism has forced me to this conclusion: we have our own kind of voodoo here in



the United States.

The voodoo that has infiltrated American Christianity is the voodoo of “storing up treasure” (Matthew 6:19). It is the voodoo of ownership and consumption, the voodoo of materialism and waste, the voodoo of Madison Avenue values combined with self-centered decision making, the voodoo of greed and credit card debt. It would be bad enough to find this voodoo nipping at the edges of our faith and our churches. But as Ron Sider illustrates in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* it has penetrated to the core of our value system and lifestyle choices.

I confess to having been a major practitioner of this kind of voodoo.

My Jesus was always invited to the mall with me, and in my world, he was always happy to be there.

The decade between my twentieth and thirtieth birthdays, when I had already been a Christian for many years, was characterized by shopping and spending. My toddlers were decked out in \$50 outfits from Baby Gap, and I had a pair of shoes to match every outfit. My husband and I traded up our houses and cars regularly. We eventually had more bathrooms in our house than people who lived there! Because we could afford this lifestyle, and make all of our payments on time, we believed we were good stewards of our resources.

In his recent book, and during a seminar at the Covenant Midwinter Conference, Sider has given a startling overview of how much the voodoo of consumerism has affected Christians in the U.S. For example, Christians tend to carry consumer debt at approximately the same levels as non-Christians. And despite radically growing incomes, the percentage of income given to charity by Christians is going down. In 1969, Christians gave 3.2 percent of their income to charity; in 2004, the percentage had decreased to 2.5 percent.

Currently, the combined income of Christians in the United States is es-

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timated to be \$10 trillion. Meanwhile, because of extreme poverty, over 30,000 children around the world will die of starvation and easily preventable diseases today alone. Every nine days, Sider notes, this silent tsunami claims over 270,000 lives. Combine this with the clear biblical mandate to feed the hungry and the effects of voodoo Christianity begin to become clear—it's a dangerous religion.

On both a personal and corporate level, our Christianity has strayed far from the biblical vision of a sold-out, self-sacrificing, community-embracing people who gladly carry their crosses, willing to give their very lives for the sake of the good news of Jesus. We're just too busy shopping.

What do we do now?

I have bought new shoes since that day a few years ago, and I don't want to advocate a kind of ascetic legalism that forces us all to die in the pair of shoes we are wearing right now. All I'm asking is that we step back from the spending frenzy and ask a few more questions before we trade up, before we buy new shoes, a new car, or a new house. As my husband and I have done this, we've come to more clearly see how the voodoo of consumerism can weaken our commitment to following Christ. And we've realized that more than financial savings, our purchase of the van was really about freedom from an endless cycle of trading up.

Another confession. For most of my Christian life, my goals have not included dying to self, selling my possessions to give to the poor, or taking up my cross. To be honest, I have sometimes been more excited about my new carpeting than going to church, feeding the hungry, or visiting the prisoner. What is wrong with me? How have I strayed so far from the goals that Jesus set for me?

Now that we are all suitably uncom-

fortable, I am supposed to say something in these next sentences to make everything O.K. again. I'm supposed to say that of course there is nothing inherently wrong with new furniture or vacations, just as long as you put some money in the offering plate. Then we all nod our heads in relief and say we'll try to do a little bit better next time.

But I can't let myself off the hook that easily. Instead, I want to suggest that God might want us to stay in a smaller house, drive our old car for a few more years, or give up our vacation in order to feed the poor. It's not that there's something inherently wrong with new houses, new cars, or family vacation. It's that by deferring these purchases, and channeling that money into a more worthwhile cause like feeding the poor, we can do something far more important—we can show our obedience to Jesus and demonstrate his love in a concrete way.

In Colossians 3:3, Paul tells us that we have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God. Along with many other verses that tell us of our real status in Christ, these words have the power to free us from the need to be beautiful, to be rich, to conform. The call of Christ in his first-century Jewish context, as a matter of fact, was exactly a non-conformist call to embrace instead an abundant life in Christ.

For my family, embracing this abundant life in Christ has meant selling our house in the suburbs and becoming church planters in a very diverse and under-resourced community in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Starting small

Halloween 2004 was my family's first

experience of trick or treating in our new urban setting. After returning home, we spent the evening hanging out with neighbors. In the midst of the commotion, my son Connor leaned over to me and whispered, "I didn't get very much candy."

In response, I offered a throwaway comment about how his teeth would be better off for it. Later that night while everyone was downstairs watching a movie, I walked past his bedroom and noticed his pile of candy on his desk. In contrast to his usual suburban haul of a pillowcase or two filled with full-size candy bars, there was a very small pile of what we used to call penny candy.

While sorting through his candy, I was suddenly aware that I had shrugged off something that was very important to him when he had mentioned it earlier. Later that night, I asked him if maybe he thought God was asking him to give up some of his Halloween candy in order to live in a place where people need food and justice and Jesus. He said he thought maybe that was the case, but that he would also really like to have more candy!

The next day, I found myself drawn back to his room several times to take another look at his Halloween candy, and I became emotional every time. Since I am not usually given to sentiment, I knew there was something more going on than just candy.

I realized that just like Connor, God was asking me if I would give up some of my candy so that others might find food, and justice, and Jesus. I want to answer yes to the call of Christ, but I would also like to have more candy.

That, I am realizing, is not one of the options. The call of Christ is to abundance that is attained through sacrifice. It is life that comes through death. The journey of discipleship really gets underway when we leave behind the voodoo of consumerism and take up our cross and follow Jesus. □