

PRODUCTS, CUSTOMERS AND CONSUMERISM

AN EKERK TREND REPORT



Jesus - sigbaar, voelbaar, verstaanbaar



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Nutrition Facts
Serving Size 1 (100g)
Amount Per Serving
Calories 100
Total Fat 10g
Sodium 100mg
Total Carbohydrate 10g
Protein 10g



INTRODUCTION

Surely the biggest phenomenon of our time is the “new”. Be it the new phone, the new car, the new house, or the new movie, the idea of a faster, fresher, or more beautiful product has the whole world running wild. Is the answer to this imperial consumerism of our time to withhold ourselves from it all, or is there an alternative? This report will unmask some of the different trends and tendencies in this regard, and look at some of the healthy alternatives for followers of Jesus.

When looking at this subject, we need to first define the term “consumer mentality”. We will do this by looking at the way Wikipedia describes ‘Consumerism’:

“Consumerism is a social and economic order that encourages the purchase of goods and services in ever-greater amounts. In economics, consumerism refers to economic policies placing emphasis on consumption. "Consumerism" is the selfish and frivolous collecting of products, or economic materialism. In protest to this some people promote "anti-consumerism" and advocacy for simple living. "Consumerism" is a force from the marketplace which destroys individuality and harms society.”¹

Now, let’s look at some of the occurrences of this consumer mentality on international and local level.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism>]

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

Different looks at consumerism:

At TED

The well-known TED Conference has addressed the topic of consumerism multiple times. Many speakers have debated the pros and cons of this.² For instance, Rachel Botsman³ spoke about the topic of collaborative consumption. She argues that humans are wired to share. One of the websites she referred to is Swaptree⁴. Swaptree was started in 2004 and taken over in August 2012 by Netycler Inc. They then changed the name to Swap.com. Swap.com offers a unique network and platform for the broadcasting of multi-party swap arrangements. Any person can swap any item (they initially started with only CDs and DVDs but the variety of items has since increased) for any other person's item on this website. Similarly, there is Zipcar⁵ that is a vehicle-sharing initiative. Rachel Botsman discusses the idea behind this concept in her TED talk. Botsman joined Swap.com when she had to get rid of some of her stuff. Instead of throwing it away, she discovered that she could swap stuff she no longer wanted for stuff that she did want. Obviously, the digital age that we live in made this much easier.

² <http://www.ted.com/topics/consumerism>

³ http://www.ted.com/talks/rachel_botsman_the_case_for_collaborative_consumption.html

⁴ <http://www.swap.com/>

⁵ <http://www.zipcar.com/how#the-basics>

⁶ http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice.html

⁷ <http://mnm1ist.com/consumerism-vs-minimalism/>

In another TED talk, Barry Schwartz⁶, a psychologist, approached consumerism from another angle. He particularly spoke about the central principle of western civilization: the freedom of choice. It is his opinion that multiple choices aren't bringing freedom, but rather that it leaves us even more paralyzed. It doesn't make us happy, only even more dissatisfied.

A minimalistic perspective

Leo Babauta runs the popular The Minimalist blog and online magazine. His website aims to help people escape the consumer mentality. He puts his money where his mouth is in design and style, and he explains his approach in an article entitled Consumerism vs minimalism⁷:

“There is in most of us an underlying desire to buy cool stuff. It stems from fears and insecurities, I think, but it is exploited by corporations and advertising. Advertising is designed to get us to desire more, to want to buy, and because it works so well, we end up buying way, way more than we need. Minimalism is the exact counter to this phenomenon, and for some of us, it's the answer.”

A faith perspective

In a trailblazing article, What is Consumerism?⁸, Tod Engstrom offers us an important perspective on how we, as believers, can counteract a growing consumer mentality in our communities.


He shares the following definition of consumer mentality with us:

“Our American economic ingenuity produced an unfortunate result: We now define ourselves by what we buy. What formerly met a basic need has become an identity, the lens through which we see the world. We, the people, exist to form a more perfect, tailor-made life. Food becomes a means of comfort. Clothing becomes a status symbol. Shelter becomes a palace of entertainment.”

According to Engstrom, a part of the solution lies in the following:

“As a new kind of people, defined by God’s Word and empowered by His Spirit to proclaim the gospel of Jesus, we are no longer consumers. Our Word-centered, gospel-centered community is built on sacrificially meeting the needs of others — love one another, honor one another, bear one another’s burdens, teach and admonish one another. A biblical community consumes the Word of God and contributes that precious Word to the lives of one another. What if we aimed for contribution, not consumption?”

⁸ <http://www.vergenetwork.org/2013/03/11/what-is-consumerism-todd-engstrom/>



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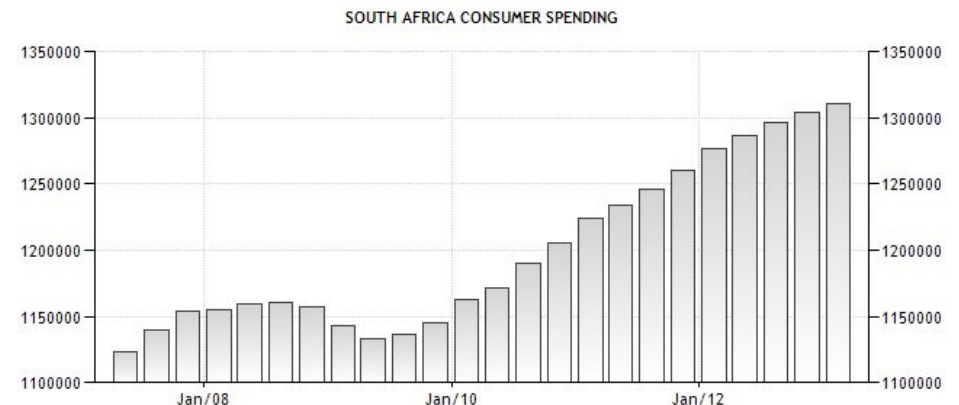
Evolution is causing you to spend too much money

In an interview with Simon Dingle of 22seven, a spend-analysis company, Lourensa Eckard of Afrikaans daily, Die Beeld, writes the following⁹:

“No matter how much money you’re earning, there are many people who will ensure that you spend it all. Dingle’s team is busy gathering interesting information about South Africa’s spending patterns. ‘Some of our clients will find that they still spend all their money, even if it’s just after they received a big raise. It has to do with evolution,’ Dingle said. Until fairly recently in the history of humanity, resources, especially food, was scarce. ‘We needed to learn how to gather food in order to have enough in the colder months or when a natural disaster struck. Money confuses us, since it is an abstract concept. We spend it quickly, since we want to exchange it into something useful.’ It’s because of this abstract nature of money that people are having so much trouble saving. Even having knowledge about it doesn’t prevent people from taking on debt. ‘Marketers know exactly what buttons to push. We get presented with this picture of a new reality that awaits us when we purchase the particular product.’”

This is also noticeable in the table above, indicating South Africa’s consumer spending from 2008 to 2013. It’s obvious that the

average consumer spend increased, which confirms what Lourensa Eckard is saying: consumers are spending all the money they receive. South Africa’s consumer spending index reached a record high of R1,311,124 million in February 2013¹⁰. However, this started levelling off in the second and third quarters as consumers’ income decreased¹¹.



⁹ https://www.22seven.com/pdf/Beeld_28_march_2013.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/consumer-spending>

¹¹ <http://www.stanlib.com/EconomicFocus/Pages/SAconsumerspendingcontinued.aspx>

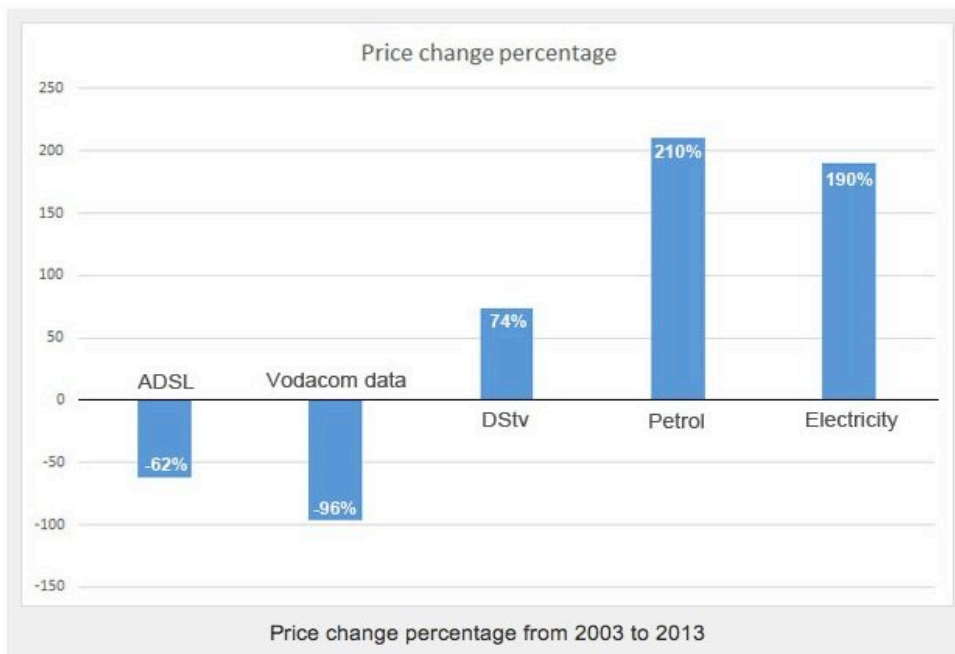
The South African consumer index

South Africa's national spending is monitored by StasSA, who publishes all the figures and statistics on their website annually¹². They define consumer spending as follows:

“Consumer spending, also called consumer consumption or expenditure, is the amount of money that households spend on goods and services in order to satisfy their needs.”

In South Africa, we are currently experiencing the highest spending by consumers ever. Here are some of the figures:

“Consumer Spending in South Africa increased to 1311124 ZAR Million in the first quarter of 2013 from 1303713 ZAR Million in the fourth quarter of 2012. Consumer Spending in South Africa is reported by the Statistics South Africa. South Africa Consumer Spending averaged 611623.73 ZAR Million from 1960 until 2013, reaching an all time high of 1311124 ZAR Million in February of 2013 and a record low of 189019 ZAR Million in February of 1960.”



¹² <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/consumer-spending>

Internet versus fuel versus electricity

Many middle-class consumers measure their prosperity and spending by use of the following three commodities: internet data, fuel and electricity. The team of MyBroadband¹³ did research to determine how the prices of these three products compared to each other over the last few years. Their findings were as follows:


“When compared with products such as petrol and food, broadband stands out as having bucked the trend of price increases. The following table provides an overview of the price changes of a few products over the last 10 years.”

It’s one thing to measure your prosperity and usage. But the question remains: how do consumers measure their identity? When individuals have a preference for a high level of consumer spending as an aspect of social competition, then it leads to a consumer mentality. The idea that material goods bring prosperity and happiness, and measure life success, is fundamental to the ideology of capitalist, consumer-based economies. It forms the essence of so-called consumer mentality.

Let’s consider the possible factors and consequences of this trend.

Telkom ADSL			
Service	2003	2013	Change
ADSL 512kbps/1Mbps (total cost)	R967	R367	- 62%
Vodacom mobile broadband			
Out of bundle (per MB)	R45	R2	- 96%
MyMeg 10	R200	R9	- 95%
MultiChoice DStv			
DStv Premium bouquet	R360	R625	+ 74%
Petrol			
95-Octane Unleaded (Reef)	R4.22	R13.08	+ 210%
Electricity			
Cost per kWh (average)	R0.21	R0.61	+ 190%

13 <http://mybroadband.co.za/news/broadband/73292-prices-from-2003-to-2013-broadband-vs-dstv-vs-petrol-vs-electricity.html>



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FACTORS AND CONSEQUENCES

One of the factors of the so-called consumer mentality could be the digital explosion on many social media platforms. Here we just have to think of Swap.com again, and how the internet has made it easier to create such an exchange platform. Heather Kelly writes on CNN's blog that the use of among others Facebook, can put us in the trap of constant comparison of ourselves with other people and with who they are and what they own¹⁴.

“What is it about the social network that bums some people out? One theory is that people are comparing themselves to their friends' seemingly fantastic digital lives and feeling inferior.”

This is such a hot topic at present that The Verge Network's Ellis Hamburger wrote an article that doesn't point the finger to Facebook, but to the internet in its totality¹⁵.

The consumer mentality lies beyond this bad feeling that Kelly is referring to. It is about the comparison of your own life with that of others that causes you to want what they have. The consumer mentality comes up when people connect their identity to owning the “right” material things. ‘Indeed, people only measure what is important to them.’

In turn, the media and marketing companies play this consumer mentality and “feed” it with visual images and audibly pleasant advertisements on the radio. Constantly and continually they create

new needs and lure consumers into buying what they crave. No wonder that after each season there's a sale in every possible shop to create new space for the latest identity-forming “must haves”.

GlobalWebIndex launched a study to research how many hours per day people are exposed to media. They primarily focussed on the shift between the traditional media and digital media and the exposure thereof. This study indicates that South Africans are exposed to traditional media, including printed media, radio and television, for about 5 hours every day. This compares to about 7 hours of exposure to digital media, accessed by computers and cell phones¹⁶.

How does all this impact the church?

¹⁴ <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/15/tech/social-media/study-facebook-blues>

¹⁵ <http://mobile.theverge.com/2013/8/22/4647916/facebook-isnt-making-you-depressed-the-internet-is>

¹⁶ <https://www.globalwebindex.net/new-infographic-daily-media-consumption-traditional-vs-digital/>

FOLLOWERS OF JESUS AND CONSUMERISM

From monasteries for the truly devout to hard-working Protestants

Right throughout the ages religious folks have wrestled with consumerism. James' resistance against wealth throughout his epistle brought an early rejection of any form of prosperity to the understanding of believers. John's warning to side-step the "sinful world" and all its seductions (1 John 2:15-17) was also understood to relate to possessions and material goods from the word go. The "truly devout" were those who lived in monasteries and deserts to escape the seductions of the world. A lifestyle of simplicity and poverty was soon the ideal that many believers aspired to.

While the monasteries became a haven for Roman Catholics who wanted to escape from the world, the so-called "Protestant work ethic" inspired the Protestant believers to work hard, but at the same time live simply. Max Weber, one of the fathers of modern sociology, introduced the idea of the "Protestant work ethic" in his well-known book, that was later translated to English under the title of "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism." Here we get the first generations of Protestant believers who reached the "top" through hard work. However, these hard-working individuals were taught not to spend too much of their hard-earned money on themselves. Any outward display of wealth was taboo. No wonder that the descendants of the first Protestants, who did not have the same values as their fathers, soon created capitalism, according to Weber.

From prosperity gospel fans to new simplicity seekers

In our day there still exist diverse views among believers around possessions and the usage thereof. On the one hand, there are fans of a so-called "prosperity gospel" with their "health and wealth" or "name it and claim it" life views. Prosperity theology is packaged in different forms, but these share the same premise that God owes his (obedient) children material welfare, possessions, health and other tangible blessings. Jesus' earthly life of poverty in their midst gets replaced with the idea of a successful, rich earthly Messiah. That's why Jesus needs to maintain and increase the quality of life and consumer mentality (!) of his followers. Poverty is often evidence of a lack of faith and sin for fans of prosperity theology.

While welfare theology has a great following the world over, there is a new flowering of contemporary forms of a monastic lifestyle among believers. People like Shane Claiborne with his "New Monastism Movement" are pioneers here¹⁷. In different ways these movements give expression to believers' deep quest for simplicity and freedom from earthly possessions. No wonder that so many local believers find resonance with retreats and pilgrimages. The Mosaïek congregation even has their own retreat centre near Krugersdorp, with a full-time spiritual mentor or instructor to lead pilgrims and visitors.

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shane_Claiborne

May we, or may we not (be consumers)?

The above-mentioned diverse views about possessions lead to different evaluations and opinions. Well-known economist and television presenter Dawie Roodt speaks about his “aversion for our religious values” in the official newspaper of the Dutch Reformed Church. Here he opposes himself to the idea (that he heard as a child in church) that Christians aren’t allowed to be rich and that they need to sell all their possessions. Subsequently, he argues that these values are dangerous because they stimulate poverty and dismiss business people as bad and greedy.

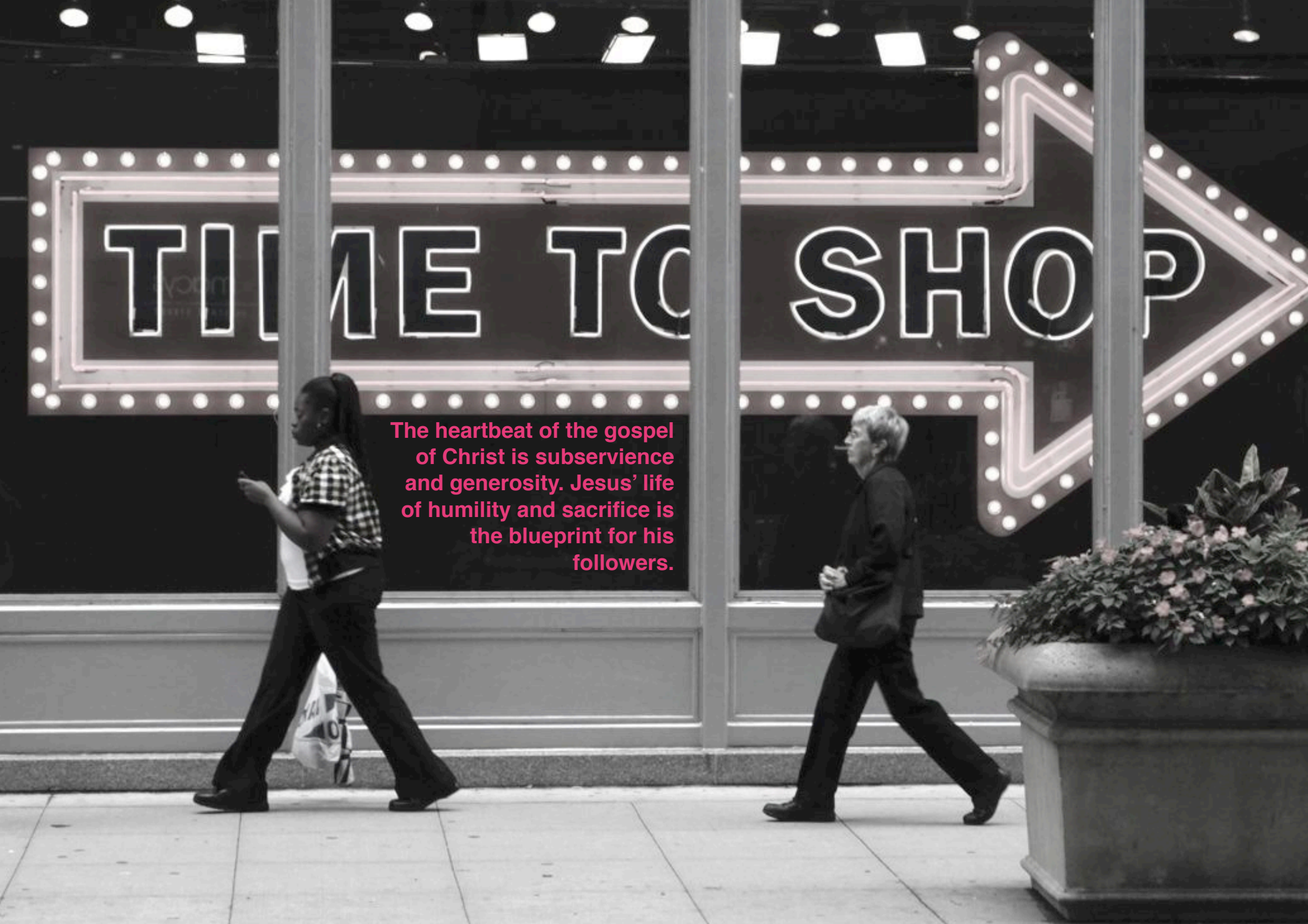
When we consider the Bible, it seems like believers are walking on a high voltage line when possessions are concerned. Possessions aren’t bad per se. Nowhere does Jesus ask his followers unconditionally to sell all their possessions and embrace poverty. While he does ask it of the young man in Matthew 19, He doesn’t expect the same sacrifice from the richest business man he met on earth. I’m referring to the chief tax collector Zacchaeus in Luke 19. In today’s language he was without a doubt a seriously wealthy millionaire. Yet, immediately after his conversion he understands that possessions are now a means to an end and that generosity is the new password in his life. That’s why he chooses to henceforth give 50% of his possessions away to people in need. The same happens to Barnabas, the other successful “businessman” in the early church. When he becomes aware of the poverty of many believers in Jerusalem, he sells his property to serve them (Acts 4:36-37).

Never does the Bible expect Christians to deliberately live in poverty, or to have no ambition when money is concerned. Indeed, money and possessions are a blessing in the hands of the wise as Proverbs frequently tells us, and we see in Ecclesiastes 5. They like sharing with others. Yet, the Bible is sharp when people turn into outright consumers who often want more stuff and who measure their self-worth by all that they possess. Or who are unhappy until obtain get

the newest gadgets, cars or clothes. Such people who are life-long “shortagers” never have enough possessions on their names. That is what Ecclesiastes 5:9 says. A life-long quest to more things on your name is an addiction that has nothing to do with the number (or shortage) of material things on your name.

Conversely, to merely be against the possession of articles and things as a goal in itself is also not the point. It will at least leave many other people who work in these sectors unemployed. Believers may possess material things, and enjoy them. They are allowed to drive new vehicles and live in nice houses, provided that they don’t suffer for where they stay, what they drive and how much money they receive. But then they need to live with generous hearts and they need to work hard daily so that poor people and the less-advantaged can also have something to eat (Acts 20:35).

The heartbeat of the gospel of Christ is subservience and generosity. Jesus’ life of humility and sacrifice is the blueprint for his followers. His choice to live among us in slave clothing, together with the fact that He liked spending his time among the outcasts, poor, sinners and marginalised, gives meaning to his protest against greed and the never-ending accumulation of possessions. Thus, the point is not to be owned by your possessions, but only by Christ!



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