

BUY THIS FAITH: RHETORICS OF CONSUMER SPIRITUALITY AND ALTERNATIVES
IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

by

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(Under the Direction of Thomas Lessl)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the way consumer culture and resistance are at play within contemporary evangelical churches through two case studies. The first explicates consumer frames within a suburban megachurch which construct a consumer spirituality. The second examines the potential of religious practices, specifically a community meal and participatory worship, within an urban emerging church. It argues that consumer spirituality invites audiences to approach their religiosity as isolated, self interested individuals and to enact their spirituality through purchases instead of other actions. This perspective can undermine Christian values including community, justice, and participation as those created in the image of God. Practices of community and participation instead provide opportunities to enact and express those values in productive ways.

INDEX WORDS: consumerism, spirituality, Christianity, megachurches, emerging church, religious practice, resistance, rhetoric, religion

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DEDICATION

to Mom, Dad, Meredith, Bryan, Lynnae. Thanks.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

“I felt like people were trying to sell me Jesus.... I never felt like Jesus was a product. I wanted him to be a person.... I felt like I got bombarded with commercials all week and then went to church and got even more.” - Donald Miller, Blue Like Jazz

Cultural activists and critics over the past several decades have been concerned about consumerism. Theorists like Theodor Adorno argue that the culture industry constructs a worldview that consumes all other perspectives into its own logic. The overriding power of the culture industry causes people to be complacent, isolated and unhappy. Because of these serious social effects, these theorists and those who agree with them look for forms of resistance. While we cannot stop consuming and still live, we must instead find ways to balance the prevalent consumerist perspective with other approaches to life. Cultural activists often search for alternatives in *avant garde* art and lifestyles, and look to embody their resistance through subvertisements – parodies of popular ads – or through knowledge by exposing the logic of the capitalist culture industry.

These same issues are at play within contemporary¹ American Christianity. While some Christians embrace consumer culture wholeheartedly, many Christians would agree with cultural critics that consumerism is a harmful element of culture. They view the commodification of Christian faith as an attitude that undermines spirituality and bastardizes the countercultural possibilities of religious thought and experience. For them, the extension of consumer attitudes to the arena of spirituality is inherently problematic because it undermines religion’s own distinct perspective. For these

¹ For the purposes of this project, the term “contemporary” denotes “in the present time.” While in some Christian contexts the term has come to mean a particular style of music or approach to Christianity, I do not intend that meaning.

Christians, the solution is likely to lie within the Christian faith itself, as it is the source of the values that they see threatened. Like other religious movements of the past, they look to the resources of historic Christianity as they search for a more authentic religion that will resist consumer Christianity or spirituality and resist consumer culture. This project will examine how these consumerist and counter-consumerist trends that are at play in the larger culture appear within contemporary Christianity.

To approach these questions, I will first examine the ways that a consumerist frame for Christianity and spirituality is at work. A useful example with clear iterations of symptoms that occur across contemporary Protestantism is megachurches. These large-scale churches are based on a model that suggests that approaching spiritual seekers “where they are” involves framing the Christian message within the paradigm of the consumerist ideology. Second, I will look at the practices at work in an emerging church, part of a more recent movement that often explicitly reacts against the megachurch. I will discuss the ways in which these practices – a community meal and participatory worship - resist some of the problems of consumerist spirituality by making available an alternate perspective.

In this project, I will bring together the insights and critiques of cultural and critical theory with the values and traditions of Christianity. I will look to cultural theorists to understand the dangers of contemporary consumer culture, and how that might play out within Christian spirituality; I look to Christian traditions for ways to reconfigure old practices so they can function as resistance within this contemporary cultural context. My goal is to look for a common critical ground that may sustain the purposes of the church and the goals of cultural activism.

Consumer Society

The problems of consumerism stem from an intensification of the problems of capitalism. Marx, drawing on Hegel, believed that the growth of industry alienated laborers from the means of production. Instead of understanding the process that creates the things they need for their livelihood, workers are specialized into one task and begin to understand their work only as the means to earn money. For Marx, laborers are oppressed by the system of capital, and their enlightenment will lead to an uprising. The problem for Marx, then, is the movement of value in modern culture from the value of land and labor to capital. All value is transferred through money –use value gives way to exchange value. The end of labor is not the products one produces or the services one provides, but the money one gains. This leads to the alienation and oppression of workers.

Theodor Adorno, in the 20th century, takes Marx's view further. Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School extend Marx's critique to culture and the arts by arguing that since they also are subject to the rules of capitalism, they constitute a "culture industry". The culture industry functions under the same capitalist logic of material production; not only are the masses alienated from their work, but also from their culture, which is produced not for the intrinsic value of the cultural or aesthetic act, but again for its value in exchange for capital. However, while cultural goods are traded for exchange value, they simultaneously appear to be separate from it – the very aspect that makes them valuable:

To be sure, exchange value exerts its power in a special way in the realm of cultural goods. For in the world of commodities this realm appears to be

exempted from the power of exchange, to be in an immediate relationship with the goods, and it is this appearance in turn which alone gives cultural goods their exchange value (Adorno, 2001, p. 38).

While the people may be deceived, their cultural elements nonetheless become something given exchange value in an open market. People are changed from producers of culture to consumers of culture and are therefore alienated from that culture, from each other, from community and even from themselves. Products of the culture industry, by their nature as commodities and through their design, breed complacency instead of reflection, which leads to further alienation and staves off the illumination which Adorno believed would lead to a Marxist revolution.

One of the ways this happens is through the culture industry's commodification and colonization of leisure. The culture industry labels specific activities as appropriate for leisure, and activities too close to work are not among them. Adorno writes, "organized freedom is compulsory. Woe betide you if you have no hobby, no pastime" (Adorno, 2001, p. 190). These hobbies, he goes on to say, require the suspension of thought and imagination. "The lack of imagination which is cultivated and inculcated by society renders people helpless in their free time" (192) and they are left to watch television or participate in mindless hobbies and "pseudo-activities" which Adorno says are parodies or imitations of the sort of real productivity they might engage in. They do this rather than engage meaningful art, in Adorno's view, or perhaps, as I would prefer to say, rather than engage meaningful relationships.

French theorist and cultural activist Guy Debord takes a view similar to Adorno's, although he referred more broadly to "the spectacle" as the problem with society. He

writes, “Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance” (Debord, 1967, p. 10). In his view, spectacle offers many of the same problems that Adorno’s culture industry brings, including isolation, commodification of time, and homogenization of individuals. Spectacle, as the quote suggests, creates a world engaged entirely on the surface of things.

Other theorists, building from these initial complaints about consumerism, are concerned about the intensification of consumer culture. Umberto Eco, for example, writes in “Travels in Hyperreality” that American advertising has “two typical slogans” (Eco, 1986, p. 7): “more” and “the real thing.” He uses this as a way to explain the impulse of hyperreality – to become more real than reality. His travels in California seek out “instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake” (1986, p. 8). He looks at reproduction art and wax museums, among other cultural curiosities. These hyperreal formulations – absolute fakes – connect to the culture of consumerism. Here is a version of the ineffable that you can buy, they seem to be telling us. Transcendence can be accessed for a low price in a store or theatre near you, along with romance, fulfillment, sex, fashion, medicine and soft drinks. By reproducing and commodifying art, history, and even people, the hyperreal creates a culture where nothing is sacred, and everything is accessible.

The problem, then, is not that we consume products, although Marx points out some of the structural problems with that. The problem is consumerism and its pervasiveness, not consumption per se; it is that consumption and commerce are the predominant paradigm we use to understand all aspects of our existence. The logic of

branding, exchange, and consumption has infiltrated into our museums of art and our history, our higher education system, and even our religion (Twitchell, 2004). The logic of consumption replaces any other subjectivities or approaches to relationships.

For many cultural activists, like the Situationists in the 1960s and the more contemporary Adbusters, led by Kalle Lasn (Lasn, 1999), the answer is radical negation. These activist groups and others like them look to undermine the power of the spectacle (in Debord's terms) through avant garde art, intended to shock viewers out of their complacency and into an awareness of what the media does to them. Presumably those who are convinced by this oppositional rhetoric also join in this kind of radical protest. For these activists, the only response to the tyranny of consumerism is radical refusal and disruption. Adbusters enact this in many ways, but they are best known for "subvertisements" – magazine and television ads produced like those for products but whose messages are about the deception of those other ads.

The weaknesses of these methods have been pointed out by critics. Avant garde art might raise awareness, but it is limited in its ability to construct viable alternatives. Heath and Potter (2004) suggest that many of these methods would not improve the situation even if everyone in the culture encountered them. Instead, they would create a negating chaos and not productive alternatives to the cultural trends they protest. Debord is explicit about the primacy of negation in his resistive efforts. He refers to it as "anti-ideology" (Debord, 1967, p. 146) and as "not a negation of style, but the style of negation" (144). Although negation and protest are important parts of social change, there must be something to replace the existing culture or ideology if positive change is to occur. Christine Harold suggests that this kind of negation, and specifically

Adbuster's style of parody, "perpetuates a commitment to rhetorical binaries—the hierarchical form it supposedly wants to upset" (Harold, 2004, p. 191). She suggests that they miss the deconstructive step of "reinscribing" those binaries that they subvert within the context of a larger field of discourse. Negation must be followed by the hard work of production – constructing something better.

There are a number of cultural projects that are searching for ways to do just that, such as the fair trade and slow food movements. These groups are finding ways to perform consumption more intentionally and productively. These solutions are helpful, but I want to draw attention also to the religious tradition for practices that undermine the problems of consumerism: excess, isolation, individualism and injustice. I am interested in reorienting extant beliefs and practices for several reasons. First, they are more likely to meet with widespread acceptance and understanding, as they begin with the familiar. Second, they have a history of performance. While that performance is rarely perfect or complete, that very aspect is encouraging to those who strive to perform those same practices today, and do not often succeed perfectly.

Religious traditions have a history of opposing consumerist trends in culture,² and many of their practices originated before the particular inventions that have brought about the current intensity of consumerism. Religious practices can work in local, embodied ways to undermine the commodification of time, relationships, meaning and spirituality itself. I chose to examine cases of consumer spirituality and resistance within American Christianity for several reasons. I think the commodification of spirituality is particularly troubling, especially from my perspective as a part of the Christian community. I also

² Sometimes this trend goes to the equally dangerous extreme (in my opinion) asserting that the material is inconsequential, and spirituality must be gained by renouncing the body or material concerns.

believe that in the United States especially Christianity is closely tied to people's communities, practices and their politics.³ Finally, I am interested in the ways Christian tradition may be invoked or borrowed from to resist cultural problems like pervasive consumerism.

Christian Theology

There are several concepts guiding Christian practice that are undermined by consumerist attitudes and behaviors. Three concepts that are particularly affected by consumerism are Imago Dei (or image of God), community, and justice. I argue that practicing these beliefs and values can be a form of resistance to consumerism, instead of allowing consumer attitudes to make people resistant to values.

One of the fundamental beliefs of Jewish and Christian anthropology⁴ is that humans were created in the Image of God (or Imago Dei). The book of Genesis says: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."⁵ This belief that humans are made in the image of God leads to a responsibility that humans behave in ways that honor the God who is reflected in their being. There are a number of potential implications for this doctrine, but one implication that is especially useful here is its call to creativity or participation. This doctrine supposes that the "urge to be creative is not ego driven but rather arises out of a theology of personhood and community identity. Its starting point is the affirmation that we are made in the image of God and that God is by nature creative" (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005, p. 175). This creating in God's image becomes difficult for those in a consumer mindset, as

³ Useful books for understanding the complex relationships between Christianity and the US include *The Political Pulpit* (Hart, 1977) and *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah, 1985). A more recent discussion of civic religion is included in Vanessa Beasley's book, *We the People* (Beasley, 2004).

⁴ I use this term to mean "beliefs about the identity of humans" and not the scientific sense of anthropology.

⁵ Genesis 1:27 NRSV

consumers are more accustomed to others doing the work of creation, which they then consume. Gibbs and Bolger explicitly deny this form of interaction when they write “Creativity by a few instead of the many, although it may inspire, does little for the priesthood of all believers and the development of gifts across the body of Christ” (p. 174). Drawing on the protestant ideal of the priesthood of all believers, they call for the participation of the entire church. While this idea is grounded in protestant theology, it could be perhaps as easily linked to the call in Catholic Vatican II for “full, conscious and active participation” (“Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy”, 1966). Both concepts highlight the need for all members of the community to be engaged in the faith *themselves* through participation in the life and worship of the church.

This affirmation of creativity and participation in and throughout the Church is linked to the next value: community. Adorno points out the ways in which the culture industry isolates, and the value of community moves people in the opposite direction. Theologians Grenz and Franke point to the central place for community in theology, “as the shared faith of the community seeking understanding, Christian theology is necessarily communitarian” (Grenz & Franke, 2001, p. 231). Communitarian thought is interested in the collective, but also the local and particular. A congregation is a community of Christians in a specific time and place. As Grenz and Franke explain it, “We are participants in a concrete, visible fellowship of disciples in covenant with one another” (Grenz & Franke, 2001, p. 92). The isolation that is created by the culture industry, according to Adorno, is antithetical to this understanding of identity and belief within community.

While community must be concrete and specific, it must also be open to others and connected with the larger body of Christian believers. Hospitality, welcoming, and openness are an important part of acting in as followers of Christ, who consistently welcomed outcasts (Tanner, 2002). In other words, not only does the Christian life happen in community, but it involves constructing a community that includes and welcomes others, even those less savory among us (Volf, 2002). Hospitality is, again, against the competitive, status-seeking nature of consumer culture (Heath & Potter, 2004). Indeed, welcoming those who are less privileged and appealing into community is closely related to the Christian concern for social justice.

Christian calls for justice tend to originate from 3 sources: the life of Christ, the writings of the prophets, and eschatological hope. First, Christ's own life demonstrates his value of justice and self-sacrifice for others, even to the point of death. Jesus' demonstrated love for the outcasts of his society, tax collectors, adulteresses, and other "sinners," works as an example to the kind of love Christians believe they ought to show to those who are disadvantaged in our society. John Howard Yoder (Yoder, 1972) uses this logic to conclude that Christians should be self-sacrificing pacifists, willing to give for others, even those of lower social class or who have wronged us.

The call to justice is also clear in the writing of the Old Testament Prophets. They chastise the greedy merchants and call instead for people to care for orphans, widows and aliens: the most helpless people of the time. The prophet Amos, for example, exhorts the Israelites to "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like

an ever-flowing stream.”⁶ Many translate this exhortation to a contemporary call to care for the poor and oppressed (Campolo, 1999; Sider, 1997; Wallis, 2005).

This prophetic vision of renewal can be closely tied to an eschatological vision of renewal that is both in the future and the present. Christians, in this view, are called to participate in the imperfect renewal today and hope for the perfect renewal of the future. “Our task is to look from the future to the present and to anticipate the future in the midst of our present existence” (Grenz & Franke, 2001, p. 246). Yoder points toward a prophetic vision of eschatological renewal. He says “That the renewal of God’s people, both the concrete renewal which is possible and has happened occasionally in past history, and the renewal after the end of the age, will have the form of jubilee is thus integral to the prophetic vision” (Yoder, 1972, p. 31). This eschatological hope both lives in the imperfection of today and yearns for the perfection of the New Earth. That vision of the New Earth includes perfect justice, especially for the downtrodden. Part of the church’s role in participating in renewal today, then, is to seek justice for the downtrodden in our time.

As many writers have pointed out, the side effects of much of American consumerism is further injustice, both in America and in other countries (eg. Lasn, 1999; Schlosser, 2001; Spurlock et al., 2004). Some anti-consumer or conscious consumption groups have seen this problem as primary, such as the fair trade movement, the buy local movement, product red, etc. This problem of consumer practices conflicts directly with the Christian value of justice.

In my second chapter, I will delineate particular ways these virtues are undermined by consumer spirituality, through my reading of a megachurch. Consumer

⁶ Amos 5:24 NIV

spirituality is troubling, because it minimizes or undermines these virtues that I believe are an important part of an accurate reading of the Bible and church tradition.

Practice

One way these values become resistant activity is through Christian practices. Dorothy Bass writes “Christian practices are patterns of cooperative human activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ” (Bass, 2002, p. 3). She also writes that “practices are not external to Christian beliefs and doctrine, but integral to them” (Bass, 2002, p. 7). Practice, then, has specific characteristics. Practice 1) happens in community 2) takes place over time and 3) enacts beliefs. Bass also points out that they 4) are material and embodied. Practices “resist the separation of thinking from acting” (p. 6). This definition of practice will be expanded through cultural and communication theory in chapter 3.

For Christians, practice is a direct enactment of *Imago Dei*. Miroslav Volf says that practices follow an “as-so” construction. “*as* God has received us in Christ, *so* we too are to receive our fellow human beings” (Volf, 2002, p. 250). That is to say, practice enacts one of the Christian virtues I highlighted – *Imago Dei* – through the logic of its selection.

Volf suggests that more often than not, belief comes as a response to practice, not the other way around. “People make Christian beliefs their own and understand them in particular ways partly because of the practices to which they have been introduced – in which their souls and bodies have been trained” (Volf, 2002, p. 256). Although Volf is talking about Christian practices in particular here, this view of practice is easily

expanded to other sets of beliefs. Practice is the embodiment and continued action of a set of beliefs, but those beliefs can come to individuals as a result of the practice, not the other way around. This understanding is echoed by de Certeau, as I will examine more closely in chapter 3.

In this sense, then, practice is both rhetorical and non-rhetorical. It is a specific, embodied enactment of a belief in a community. It can also be an unexamined habit, but that non-rhetorical habit is continually open to examination and persuasiveness. Tanner also says, though, that it often becomes necessary within circumstances to examine practices and determine whether they are still important, relevant, or ethical (Tanner, 2002, p. 235). Practices are both polysemic and require examination, because of their important part in repeated routines or behavior of adherents. As such, practice is a powerful, sustained, embodied rhetoric, not only for Christians, but for any community.

Emerging and Postmodern Christianity

To see how practice functions within contemporary Christian communities in ways that are resistant to consumerism, we must examine particular communities and discourses. One particularly fruitful nexus is the emerging church conversation. In chapter 3 I examine practices of a particular emerging church: Tribe of Los Angeles. Emerging Christians emphasize the need to embody Christianity in a “postmodern culture.” The seminal text in this discourse, Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian* (2001), targets lay readers although McLaren was obviously influenced by other academics and theologians. McLaren’s book, like much of the discussion within this discourse, is about how to rehabilitate Christian meaning in a way that makes sense to people living within the present (“postmodern”) cultural environment. For McLaren, this

means differentiating between modern culture and postmodern culture, and the way the church should behave in each. He suggests that postmodernism values narrative, mystery and community, while modernism valued/values proposition, certainty, and the individual. Many emerging church leaders were drawn into reframing their faith because of their disillusionment with the consumer spirituality of the modern megachurch, which they see within that modern frame, which for them is often dominated by consumerist attitudes. This reactionary ethos also makes the emerging church conversation a good place to look for discourse about resisting consumerism in the church.

Terminology here is a bit of a challenge. The emerging church has received some press and attention recently, but any academic examination of it will be challenging, because its borders are permeable and its members are reluctant to define themselves as comprising a unified movement. As a result, some persons who have a lot in common with thinkers in emerging churches do not identify themselves as such. Others who refer to themselves as emerging have less to do with other emerging thinkers. Almost any generalization will have a significant exception. DA Carson (2005) addresses this issue in the introduction of his book on the subject as well. This project, therefore, does not attempt to characterize the emerging church movement, such as it is. I am more interested in specific strains of discourse that seem dominant in the writing and practice of some of those concerned with the role of the church in contemporary culture. Much but not all of this discussion and praxis is taking place within those churches and groups who label themselves as a part of the emerging church conversation, or who are influenced by it. Consequently, I borrow both from emerging church literature and other Christian literature, and I focus my reading on one particular congregation.

Although emerging Christianity often positions itself as a reaction to problems with the “modern church,” it is important to remember that the diversity within the Christian church makes it difficult to locate any trend or argument in only one group. In fact, similar reactions are happening within different traditions, and some Christians who express the same dissatisfaction with modern churches turn instead to older traditions, such as Eastern Orthodoxy or Anglicanism where they seem to find many of the same values and practices that emerging Christians seek to rehabilitate from these traditions. Emerging churches are interesting, then, not because their ideas and practices are revolutionary – they explicitly draw on these older traditions. Instead, they are useful to examine because they explicitly illuminate how these traditions might function within contemporary western culture. Much emerging church literature is implicitly or explicitly a response to the “seeker sensitive” mega-church movement that largely did away with most of the liturgy and tradition of the church for fear that it was inaccessible to “seekers” who are curious about Christianity, but not committed. As a result, these writers and practitioners consciously defend their efforts to rehabilitate these traditions. This makes their messages often more useful for this analysis than those from Christian groups that continue to take part in these same traditions for decades or even centuries.

Christianity and Culture

As I have already mentioned, there has been plenty of thinking, writing, speaking and acting within the Christian church on the discontinuities between consumer culture and Christian belief. For this reason, it will be useful to review some of that work that has most influenced the trends outlined thus far.

Much Christian thinking on this issue begins with Richard Niebuhr's seminal work, *Christ and Culture* (1951). Niebuhr suggests that the Christian church has followed six different orientations with regard to culture, and he clearly favors the final one: Christ transforming culture. He points out also that different orientations are necessary at different times, and different aspects of a culture could garner the favor or opposition of the church. In the case of consumer culture, it is my argument, and the argument of other "postmodern" Christians and theologians, that Christian theology demands a resistive approach, or in Niebuhr's terms, "Christ against culture."

Other works on the counter-capitalist nature of the gospel have been written in recent decades. Tony Campolo brought explicitly anti-consumerist ideas to the fore, drawing attention to the biblical calls to humility and generosity, and applying them directly, asking Evangelical Christians "would Jesus drive a BMW?" (Campolo, 1999). Others, such as the liberation theologians and Stanley Hauerwas, make similar demands that Christians attend to economic justice.

Much of the work within the discipline of communication about Christianity and Culture has a mass media focus. Some scholars examine the way Christians create their own media (Gooch, 1996; Pauley, 2005; Romanowski, 1990), and others the ways Christians endorse or resist mainstream media. Quentin Schultz has built much of his career on this subject, and his recent book (Schultze, 2003) examines the way Christian "tribes" or cultural groups have related to media outlets across the history of radio, television, and the FCC.

A rhetorical perspective is valuable for understanding recent discourse about practice in postmodern Christianity, because the rhetorical tradition offers language to

understand the way discourse and practices function to both cause material change and create messages about what is important, what Christianity means, and how Christians view the world. It also offers a perspective on how Christians address the world rhetorically in ways besides through media – through their practices and communities. This study can give depth to our understanding of Christian practice, and expand our understanding of cultural resistance and the forms that it might take.

A Rhetorical Perspective

A rhetorical perspective gives us language to understand these discourses, and also can benefit from them. Rhetoricians have pointed to the importance of embodied rhetoric in politics, protest, and the public screen (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; Enck-Wanzer, 2006; Marvin & Simonson, 2004; I. Young, 1990) and the rhetoric of place in analyses of monuments and museums (Biesecker, 2002; Blair, 2001, 2006; Blair & Michel, 2000). We have acknowledged the danger of ignoring embodied practice in our understanding of political and social action and our history. I hope to extend this attention to embodied expressions of religious faith. To this end, I examine the way megachurch discourse, marketing strategies, architecture and practices construct a consumer spirituality, and then contrast it with what I view as a more resistive understanding of Christianity through the lens of Christian practice in an emerging church.

Additionally, I posit that Christian traditions can be an untapped source of invention for social progressives, and that using the resources of the Christian tradition also provides accessibility and justification to those within the Christian faith, and even those familiar with it. I also suggest, using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome,

that these practices are meaningful beyond the boundaries of the Christian community. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005) suggests that agency is (among other things) communal, produced artistically through invention and constrained by material barriers. I suggest that practice is one way that agency is both invented and employed in a material way within communities.

Finally, I join other scholars who are skeptical of critics who only deconstruct the culture by describing its harmful and paradoxical nature. While I critique consumer spirituality, I want to also take the step following this critique by imagining and describing rhetorics that function as alternatives for a toxic consumerism. I look to the Christian tradition as a rich source of theory and practice, but I also want to encourage other scholars to creatively and thoughtfully examine and prescribe possible alternatives to the problematic frames we observe in our culture and world.

Chapter Preview

In the chapters that follow, I contrast two distinct orientations of particular churches toward consumerism. My analysis attempts to “read” the verbal content of a worship service in addition to the spatial, visual, and corporeal aspects of that church experience. I work with the assumption that all these aspects work together to rhetorically construct a preferred approach to worship, Christianity and spirituality. I select these particular churches because of their availability, and clear contrast as exemplars of larger trends within American evangelical Christianity.

In chapter two, I examine the consumer mode of spirituality present in North Point Community Church, a megachurch north of Atlanta, GA. I discuss the ways that architecture, activities, social norms and verbal messages encourage those who attend the

church to approach it as consumers: isolated, self-interested and unengaged. I argue that these negative outcomes directly contradict the values I discuss in this chapter: community, justice and participating as an Image of God.

In chapter three I look to Tribe of Los Angeles, an emerging church on the Miracle Mile of Los Angeles, for potential alternatives. I suggest that understanding spirituality and Christianity through the lens of practice rhetorically constructs a community that resists those negative effects of consumer spirituality. I examine in particular the ways the practice of a community meal and of participatory worship encourage those who attend to value community and participation, and to care about each other and extend that care to others.

In chapter four I summarize my arguments from the earlier chapters, and consider the implications of those arguments, not only for Christians, but also for rhetoricians and activists, concerned with ways to resist the negative effects of consumer culture. This project seeks to engage both Christian and non-christian discourses about the problems of consumer society and their presence within the church, as well as ways that they might be addressed.

Chapter 2 – Buy This Faith: Consumer Spirituality in a Megachurch

North Point Community Church sits firmly in suburbia. This is easy to guess from looking at a map – it is located in Alpharetta, Georgia, 30 miles north of downtown Atlanta. It also becomes abundantly clear as one approaches the church, passing strip malls and office parks that line the divided highway, and waits in line behind the dozens of SUVs that turn onto the road leading up to the church’s mammoth parking lot.⁷ There visitors, like me, are greeted by parking ministers in reflector vests who direct cars to stop or go, and direct those entering toward the empty parking areas. After noting the letter labeling the area we parked in, the masses approach the building. The building recalls a mall with its many doors and wide open hallways. My colleague suggests that the appropriate architectural analog is the modern airport, and perhaps her comparison is more apt. The people seem to be traveling with purpose, disconnected with each other and toward a deadline. Following the crowd toward the two large auditoriums, one might expect to see more people interacting – greeting each other and chatting. But most are quiet as they move toward their seats; silence is encouraged by the “ten before” video being projected on screens at the front of the auditorium, which diverts attention from the other people, much like the preview reel before a movie. Hosted by a perky blonde, the video advertises weekday events at the church and provides news about the church’s growth and activities during that week. The corner of these large screens, as well as those in the hallway, display a countdown to the time the service will begin.

⁷ Many of the details included in this chapter’s reading of the megachurch are from my impressions based on two visits to the church for the 11 am service on November 12, 2006 and February 4, 2007. I am indebted to my friends and colleagues James Gilmore and Katie Rush who accompanied me on these visits and offered helpful insights. I also reviewed available material on websites and podcasts to gain additional experience.

North Point Church began in 1995, and its development since then has closely mirrored the growth of similar churches such as Saddleback Church in Orange County, CA, and Willow Creek Church in suburban Chicago. This particular style of suburban church, which caters primarily to white middle class families, originated out of what has been variously called the “seeker sensitive” movement, “church growth” movement or the “megachurch” movement. While sociologists have mainly defined “megachurches” in terms of membership numbers (Eiesland, 1997) over 1 or 2 thousand, I want to amend this definition to include not only size but style. When I use the term “megachurch” I do not simply mean a church that is large, but one that also has several other characteristics—though ones likely to reflect its size. In particular, the megachurch will employ the terms, values and strategies of the business world in gauging and pursuing church growth, which is its primary indicator of success. That is, instead of a bottom-line in high profits, they are pursuing high membership numbers. These goals are reached through strategies which these churches self-consciously draw from the business world, and which are reflected in their architecture, branding strategies, demographic analyses, product development, and their language. To put it more succinctly, megachurches, in addition to having a large membership, employ the rhetoric of the marketplace within the realm of religion.

In discussing this style of church, Shane Hipps invokes McLuhan’s concepts of media. He considers worship services in terms of the media they use – he also considers events themselves as a medium. According to Hipps,

The medium of (megachurches) is primarily a worship service designed to attract a crowd, respond to the overwhelming demands of a consumer

society, and facilitate personal transformations. This way of doing church amplifies and reinforces the modern gospel that affirms individualism and the privatization of faith” (Hipps, 2005, pp. 99-100).

As Hipps indicates, this way of constructing and practicing church is a particular Christian adaptation that assimilates into consumer culture and even amplifies it. In this chapter I will discuss some of the ways that megachurches construct the Christian-as-consumer through rhetorics of the marketplace incarnated in spatial, visual and verbal messages. I argue that these elements discursively construct a model⁸ of a consumer Christian who approaches religion individualistically, isolated from others and interested in the costs and benefits to herself, and who sees consumption of media and products as the appropriate end of a religious practice. In the next chapter, I will examine alternative modes of approaching the church within contemporary Christianity, some of which come as a reaction to this amplified consumer model.

Texts

Although several scholars and theologians have examined how consumerism is embodied in the megachurch (many rhetors within the emerging church movement call it the “modern megachurch” in contrast to the “postmodern emerging church”), I believe there are several important reasons to reiterate some of their arguments alongside a reading of my embodied experience within one such church. First, it is useful to understand the ways that consumerism is identified and sometimes conflated with the culture of Christianity in order to both see the need for resistance and to evaluate its

⁸ It is important to note that these elements construct a model of a Christian, not that they produce that model exactly in an audience. In other words, my analysis is of the response suggested by the text, not the actual response elicited, which is impossible to measure using this method. Future research may add to this discussion by examining real attitudes among these congregations through interviews or surveys.

efficacy. To this end, I contrast the implications of consumer spirituality against those relevant spiritual virtues I identified in chapter 1: community, participation and justice. Second, by reading my own experience alongside these more theoretical arguments, not only can I illustrate these trends as they occur but also, through the varied and polysemic readings that come from experiences, I can enrich understanding in this literature through my own observations.

Although megachurches have been examined by scholars in other disciplines including Sociology, English and Theology, a rhetorical perspective is relatively new. As a rhetorician, I bring a perspective that is especially sensitive to the persuasive power of spaces, language and symbols. As such this project will require the construction of a text from fragments of experience and other texts (McGee, 1990). These fragments include the physical environment of the church, the actual content and performance of a worship service and other related elements.

While embodiment is an important aspect of my analysis in each part of this thesis, this chapter is attentive especially to the rhetoric of religious places. While others have begun to attend to the rhetoric of place in rhetorical criticism (Biesecker, 2002; Blair, 2001; Blair & Michel, 2000) these works all focus on memorials and their impact on our understanding of national and global history. Although this is an important topic for examination, the religious and spiritual meanings of place have not received the same kind of attention. In fact, in her 2006 NCA lecture on the Civil Rights Memorial (Blair, 2006), Carole Blair notes the potential influence of religious tradition on understanding the meaning of that monument, especially given the use of scripture in a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr., and baptismal imagery from the Christian tradition, something

largely overlooked in her 2000 article with Neil Michel on the same memorial. Even when Blair considers the religious meaning of some aspects of this place, she largely underplays them and suggests these readings were probably not part of the designers' intention. While in Blair's work religious meaning is tangential to her primary focus, I still believe that minimizing its influence privileges the experience of a minority of Americans who have not been exposed to some kind of Judeo-Christian belief system. This is a serious omission, once one considers the impact that religion has in the lives of most humans, and particularly the way constructions of Christian religion have influenced political and social values and discourses in U. S. history. (Bellah, 1985; Hart, 1977; Phillips, 2006).

This project, then, aims to attend to the messages church spaces communicate about what it is to be religious and how one is to live as a result. The physical design of a megachurch is important here because it is an environment that is created intentionally, almost certainly at great expense, in order to create a particular experience. The place is also crucial to understanding the experience of the church, and the sort of person that experience invites visitors and members to be. This analysis would be incomplete, of course, without also taking into account the verbal messages in the actual worship event and other publications of the church, which I will also examine here, as these all work together to construct a particular worship experience and encourage a particular style of Christianity.

Architecture

While the approach to the North Point building itself prepares visitors for a consumer experience, heightened by the large parking lot and crowds which, James

Twitchell suggests, are often signs of a good consumer product that marketers contrive to create (2004, p. 87), the building and decor create a consumer as well. After being greeted quickly at what appears to be the main door, visitors pass two rooms on opposite sides of the hallway: “starting point” on the left – the program for new members (the website explains that the program is for “seekers, starters and returners”) and “connections” on the right – a bookstore complete with books by pastor Andy Stanley and in-house worship cds, as well as other recent books by popular Christian writers like John Eldredge (author of the top-selling Christian book about manhood, *Wild at Heart*) and other popular worship cds, like the Passion series. The location of these two spaces ensures that visitors are given two important opportunities to “buy into” the experience immediately upon arriving or before leaving, either through an actual purchase, or through membership in the church. The implied preferred response to the content of the worship time seems to be one of two options: either guaranteeing your return or taking home some related media.

I doubt any Christian would deny that presenting ways for church visitors and members to “own” their worship experience and broader spiritual life is a positive, even necessary part of the work of the church. I think, though, it is telling when a church presents a store literally across the hall from a space for new members. This architectural decision implies that purchasing items and becoming involved are equally appropriate modes of response. Beyond that, the very existence of a store suggests that commerce is appropriate in a church setting – something that has traditionally been frowned upon in

church history.⁹ This problem I will address in more depth later in this chapter. For now, the clear availability of the store suggests that purchasing is an appropriate response.

As one continues through the broad hallways lined with information tables and themed children's ministry areas, the interior space does not feel very churchy at all – like the outside and parking lot, it evokes a mall, airport or business. James Twitchell quotes Bill Hybels, the “entrepreneurial pastor of Willow Creek,” stating that “what he wanted his parishioner to say when he came to Willow Creek was ‘I was just at corporate headquarters for IBM in Atlanta Wednesday and now I come to a church here, and it’s basically the same’” (Twitchell, 2004, p. 92). This desire is evident not only in the atmosphere at Willow Creek but also at North Point. The atmosphere of corporate or retail space is familiar and comforting, but I suggest also problematic. By reminding visitors of corporate or retail experiences, it encourages visitors to behave as they would in those contexts. As a sales person or shopper, people are interested in protecting their interests, and finding out what they can gain from the engagement at hand. As I will detail in chapter three, I believe a church community is more productive when it encourages participants to consider what they might give instead of what they might take.

Like a retail store, the creation of a specific atmosphere is an important part of the North Point mission, as they indicate in their mission statement:

Our mission is to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

We do so by creating environments where people are encouraged and equipped to pursue intimacy with God, community with insiders, and influence with outsiders.

⁹ Indeed, one of Martin Luther's reasons for beginning the Protestant Reformation was the sale of indulgences.

What stands out in this mission statement is the focus on “creating environments.” The mission of the church is not, apparently, to pursue intimacy with God, construct community and minister to others. Instead, it is to create an environment where individuals are “encouraged and equipped” to do so. The task of the *church* in this mission is to “create environments” that produce individuals who, apparently, learn about God, create community and share with others because they are encouraged by the church. These things may or may not happen in the programs and places of the church. This weak ecclesiology is problematic because it individualizes the three elements of the Christian life that they hope to encourage. Instead of the mission of the church being to actually do those things communally, the church encourages and equips people to do so elsewhere. The ambiguous location of intimacy, community and influence suggests flexibility, but also a sense that individuals are inspired or prepared to do these things by the church environments, but perform them on their own. The church functions as the outdoor supply store for the camping trip that is Christian living – not as the shelter to camp in or a hiking group to join in with. In the sermon I heard in February, Andy Stanley expressed this same mission in a slightly different way: “our mission is to lead people into a relationship with Jesus Christ by making an irresistible environment so even if they don’t believe what we believe they’ll want to come back anyway.” The importance of creating environments is more poignantly highlighted in this phrasing of the church’s mission. What end, then, do these “irresistible environments” serve? Judging by Stanley’s statement, they make the church so appealing that people come back to the church. Returning to church, it seems, is an end in itself, to consume more of this “irresistible environment.” The other historic tasks of a church, worshipping God,

creating community, learning together and serving others are less important than keeping visitors coming back for the show. This environment, after all, is not where these things take place. It is where people are “encouraged and equipped” to do them. The church is not where Christianity takes place, it is where it is sold, and just like in a retail store, the right atmosphere and brand identity are what it takes to get people in the doors.

This task of creating appealing environments becomes even more evident when one visits North Point’s large spaces for children and adolescents. “Upstreet,” their environment for grade school children, invokes Main Street USA at Disneyworld, complete with storefronts, stairs that lead into a painting of a pillared city hall, a stylized old fashioned gas pump, street lamps and cobblestones, and 1950s relics (like a tin lunchbox and old toys) in display cases. This brightly colored and lit themed space leads to equally bright rooms where children meet in smaller groups (each with a large screen and stage).

The teen area is equally themed, but the theme is targeted at a different demographic. This space invokes quirky, natural spaces, similar to the Starbucks brand and restaurants like Applebees and TGI Fridays. The predominance of wood grains, browns, blacks and greens in the décor invoke, like Starbucks (Dickinson, 2002), authenticity and naturalness. While the children’s area is bright and busy, the teens area seems more low-key, like a restaurant or coffee shop, perhaps to encourage conversation, and certainly to cater to the different tastes of high school students.

These heavily themed areas are all part of creating an evocative, “real” experience for the children and young people who come to this church. The Disney-like unreal-reality of these environments brings to mind Baudrillard’s discussion of Disneyland’s

function within the world of simulacra. He writes “The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp... this world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the “real” world” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 13). Perhaps these over-constructed environments function not only to appeal to children and their parents, but also to mask the way the adult world, especially within this church, is also artificially constructed. Perhaps, like Disneyland, these children’s areas function to heighten the perception of authenticity and intimacy of the adult service. Painfully constructed authenticity is certainly part of the adult worship time: the pastor and worship leaders are projected (in close up) on large video screens, they wear casual clothes and speak colloquially with personal anecdotes and sometimes self-depreciating humor. All of these strategies function to aid in the perception of the leaders as accessible and authentic, although the large numbers of people and physical distance (some audiences for sermons are not even in the same city, much less the same room as the pastor) stand in the way of real access. The Disney-like décor may function to distract from this problem of distance and inauthenticity. If the décor of the children’s area is so clearly façade, everything else becomes more authentic by comparison.

The architectural messages of North Point Church construct a consumer spirituality that is reinforced in other verbal and structural messages in the church. First, it mimics commercial spaces, and emphasizes a need to get people in the door. These spatial messages suggest that the church can be approached like any other commercial setting, with personal interests in mind and something for sale. Secondly, it is portrayed as a place where one gets equipment for the work of Christianity, not where that work is

actually done. In a latter section I will examine how some of that equipment is metaphorical product, and how the church also provides opportunities for attendees to literally buy things in prominent physical locations. These aspects of the Northpoint church architecture encourage attendees to approach the church like they approach a store – considering products on the basis of costs and benefits to themselves, and therefore isolated from others. Additionally, the prominence of screens and stages suggest that the focus within the church should be on the messages presented by leaders, not on the others who are attending. Spaces encourage participation as observers and audience members, not participants and community members. These spaces function rhetorically by making an implicit argument that consumer perspectives are the frames and responses that are valued.

Demographics

The ways in which megachurches like North Point focus on and manage demographics are also distinct from many other Christian churches, and similar to corporate marketing. This is clear from the themed spaces I have already discussed but also in the organization of their website, which is organized according to demographic. This constant working within smaller demographics contributes to the isolation and individualism that is a negative effect of the same consumer paradigm in culture at large.

Because demographic sensitivity is so important, the church has Sunday morning programs for a variety of age groups. Their website's splash-page directs new visitors to a "before you attend" page offering videos of what to expect in each age-oriented "environment" for grades K-5, 6-8, 9-12 and the main worship for adults. Although all the adults generally worship together, the small group ministry is often divided up by

finer demographic data including special groups for single people, married people, new members, and bible studies by topic. Additionally, by immediately asking webpage visitors to identify themselves as the target for one of these demographic ministries, it is also rhetorically suggesting that the particular preferences of an individual are a higher priority than the unity of a community.

While it is certainly an advantage in a large church like this to be able to meet with others in similar life positions, it also means that members of the congregation are not given opportunity to interact with those different from themselves, even in age bracket or relationship status. Putnam (2000) claims in his popular book, *Bowling Alone* that community involvement in America is in decline – including volunteerism, joining associations, and church attendance, and these problems mean that people are less sympathetic to the plight of others, since they limit their associations to only those like them. His research also indicates, however, that those who continue to attend church are also likely to participate in these other kinds of engagement, like joining associations, voting, or philanthropy. One of the reasons Putnam believes these kinds of activities are positive for society is that it encourages people to engage interpersonally with others who are different from them, and develop sympathy and understanding for diverse perspectives, leading to a more robust democracy. Demographic division in megachurches harms this positive effect of church attendance for citizenship. While church has historically been a location where people encounter others of different ages and class, demographic segregation within churches effectively keeps people from interacting with those who have a different experience from them. Putnam's research indicates that these opportunities are in decline everywhere. Making them less

challenging for church members misses an opportunity to promote understanding, communication and even deliberation that are already so rare in contemporary society.

While some might suggest that this kind of division allows age-appropriate messages for children, scholars and church leaders in some Christian traditions argue that intergenerational relationships are a key role of the Christian church (Vanderwel, 2008 (in press); Wilk, 2005). While children's emotional and cognitive development should be taken into account, worshipping among adults enables children to learn what it means to be an adult in church through observing and participating as they grow, because they are treated as important members of the church as a whole (R. J. Keeley, 2007 (in press)). Although many parents are drawn to churches like North Point and Willow Creek because of their appealing children's programs, education scholar Robert Keeley suggests this might be doing a disservice to these children in the long run, and adding to the confusion of young adults uncertain how to behave as such. Separating children and teens from adults implicitly communicates to them that they are not supposed to desire intergenerational community, and that their spiritual needs are somehow different from those in a different demographic. Both questionable assumptions.

Beyond offering opportunities for children to feel like full participants and enabling them to participate in the church body as a whole, this segmenting also limits opportunities for people to encounter and appreciate what diversity there is in their church. By limiting church interaction to only those who have similar experience, it also limits opportunities to learn from others who are different from you. Just as general marketing constructs a person as a particular type of individual who identifies with those who share his/her tastes and dissociates from others, demographic catering within

churches reinforces those attitudes and maintains a world where it is difficult to be sympathetic to people whose experience is different from one's own because you do not know them. This isolation in society as a whole is bad for democracy (Allen, 2004; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Putnam, 2000). The Christian church offers an opportunity to engage with others, and demographic separation limits the productivity of that opportunity for developing character and sympathy, and understanding of others.

Besides the cost to democracy, undervaluing diversity and difference comes at a cost to hospitality. Visitors are more likely to be shuffled into the appropriate demographic group rather than welcomed by everyone as a part of the community. This reduces the ability of the church to welcome everyone without category. Additionally, getting to know others who have a different experience is likely to increase one's sensitivity to injustice. Knowing people from a variety of ages, classes and social positions means one is more intimately aware of the costs of injustice. Reducing these relationships makes people tend more toward isolation and a self-centered belief that everyone is the same as they are. Dividing people by demographic also reinforces generalizations about men, women, young people, old people, couples and singles in a way that overlooks and reduces individual difference by reducing a person to several demographic indicators. By emphasizing these demographic divisions, the church argues implicitly that demographic differences are more important than shared values or beliefs. In addition, the emphasis on difference suggests that those who are different have less to teach us than those who are similar, although the literature of democracy suggests the opposite.

Like other elements of consumer spirituality, demographic divisions invite members to attend to their own needs and the needs of others like them, and virtually ignore the community as a whole, especially as it includes others unlike them who might be disenfranchised. By constructing a system where individuals are forced to consider their own subject position based on these groupings, the church discourages thought for others even within the church. One wonders, then, how someone trained to think this way can conceive of the injustice wrought on others outside of the church, or even their own country.

In addition to dividing the congregation into particular demographics, these churches also use survey data, or the voice of the masses to determine what to offer these particular demographic groups. Willow Creek, for example, surveys its attendees to find out what they find appealing, their level of involvement, what they would like to see change, etc. (Twitchell, 2004). While every church is interested in learning how best to serve those within the church and those they hope to reach, megachurches use marketing tools to do this on a mass scale not done before.

Additionally, survey data and opinion-polling are a primary mode of understanding these congregational needs. This is problematic because it is used as an alternative to interpersonal relationships and conversations. Also, Twitchell suggests that allowing consumer desires to dictate so much of a church's work, such as occurs at Hybel's Willow Creek church, might be problematic. Hybel's focus on

the "felt needs" of his baby boomers means that those weekend messages reflect a nurturing, forgiving God who will help with family life, day care, job stress, recreation, and the drive home. Willow Creek's staff makes

sermonizing decisions on the seeming whims of the marketplace...

Religious programmers simply analyze what the consumer needs and likes. (Twitchell, 2004)

I agree with Twitchell's suggestion that perhaps the marketplace should not be a measure of what is right – after all, Jesus himself was rather unpopular at some points in his ministry, precisely because he said things his audience didn't want to hear. For example, Jesus sermon in Galilee was so offensive to his hearers that they tried to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:28-9). Similarly, many Old Testament prophets were hated by those in power during their time. For example, the prophet Elijah is often running for his life, including one incident after Elijah beats all the prophets of Baal in a dramatic showdown on a mountaintop (1 Kings 18-19). While it may be true that God is not calling megachurch ministers to be like the prophets and speak an unpopular word, looking for invention in the desires of the people precludes that possibility.

In addition to playing down the importance of understanding others, then, this reliance on pleasing the masses suggests that unpopular calls to justice will not be heard. While it doesn't necessarily preempt these kinds of messages, it certainly makes it less likely that the church will tell anyone something they don't want to hear. This is a serious problem with a consumer approach to religion – it means that religion will only placate and not challenge, which weakens the power of religion to change peoples lives and society.

Branding and Logos

While many scholars reference several aspects of brand identity as “branding” I want to specifically address the use of logos and familiar visual and verbal cues to

construct branded identity. While each sub-ministry of North Point church is carefully branded, they also construct images that parody existing brands in some of their upstreet décor, and as logos for sermon series'. For example, the series in February 2007 on my visit was titled "On Location" and the title was printed to mimic the logo of internet video host YouTube. For another example, the July 2006 series "Marriage by Design" visually mimics popular design shows like Discovery's *Surprise by Design* or TLC's *Trading Spaces*. In the upstreet environment, there are posters on the wall mimicking ads for Chick-Fil-A, Mastercard, and iPod.

As I have discussed elsewhere (B. Keeley, 2006), I believe these sorts of parody images are problematic within a religious context. They suggest a comparison between religious faith, relationships or truth with consumer products. While product advertisers have been making this comparison all along (Twitchell, 2004), the inverse is less flattering; while a "heavenly" frankfurter is appealing, a soft-drink-like God is seems less so. Expressing religious ideas and values in the framework of advertising diminishes their perceived value, instead of adding to it. While I am fond of my ipod, and I enjoy fast food, I would hope religion would try to offer me something more significant and lasting than trendy technology, financial credit or a chicken sandwich. Although these parodies are likely an attempt to create relevance for these topics by invoking cultural icons, there is the unfortunate side effect of minimizing the significance of the message of the church by drawing such a comparison.

Many viewers, however, might view these ads as parody – a message of contrast rather than comparison. This understanding, while less troublesome, is still problematic. For example, the poster mimicking the Mastercard ad campaign writes "Gas to church:

\$7, Late lunch with your family: \$38, knowing the truth: priceless. Jumpstart. There are some things money can't buy." This plays with Mastercard's ads designed to invoke "priceless" moments and relationships, potentially subverting the campaign to suggest that a credit card cannot fulfill you like the church can. However, by using the same tropes and terms, it reifies the existing structures within advertising. While it may be subverting single advertisements or brand identities, it reifies the system of entertainment and advertising, and helps the same system to extend its reach even within the church.

More generally, the consistent use of branding strategies encourages church members to approach their faith and church community the same way they would approach any consumer product. Consumption is an individual activity – consumers measure costs and benefits in terms of their own needs. This makes perfect sense when selecting a shampoo or a restaurant, but presenting religion within this same paradigm discourages individuals from approaching religion as something that is relational, communitarian, and meaningful. In addition to troubling irreverence, these images invite the same self-interested attitude that users rightly use when approaching advertising. Religion, however, is not necessarily about finding the best package that delivers the most benefits with the least costs. Instead it is about thinking beyond ones own interests to the interests of the community and the Kingdom of God. In fact, in one of the gospels, Jesus tells his followers "any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33, NIV). As Yoder explains it, "to be a disciple is to share in that style of life of which the cross is the culmination," he continues to suggest that Jesus presents an alternative to wielding power or opposing it through servanthood (Yoder, 1972, p. 38). A consumer approach to Christianity overlooks this important aspect.

While each of these instances of consumer framing might seem harmless alone, in combination with so many other instances, it creates a preferred perspective, and makes available an attractive frame to understand religion within. Another case where this consumer framing takes place is in literal sale of merchandise at the church, and in the metaphorical and stylistic sale of the message.

Sales – Actual and Metaphorical

While all the features of the megachurch I have already discussed encourage visitors to think of spirituality as a product to be bought and sold, this is done most explicitly in two ways: by selling faith-related products like books, cds, dvds and other merchandise, and by presenting the message of the week as a consumer product.

First, megachurches present this paradigm by actually offering items for sale. I have already discussed the location of the church bookstore immediately next to the entrance/exit. In addition to this store, there is a kiosk near each auditorium where copies of that day's sermon are offered for sale immediately after the service. Outside each of the children's areas there is a table with age-relevant cds and books for sale.¹⁰ Sermon podcasts conclude with a code for listeners to get ten percent off their online purchases. In other words, the presence of sales within this church is ubiquitous.

In some ways, these function as souvenirs, a way to record or remember a religious or spiritual experience. Harvey Young explains that souvenirs record, the that which was into a material object that can be referenced and revisited over time. In contrast, the present, the that which is now, existing just beyond ourselves, resists both objectification and commodification because its ongoing

¹⁰ My colleague James Gilmore noticed these when he visited with me and pointed out the similarity to Disney world where "every ride has a souvenir stand."

status disallows the creation of an entrapping retrospective narrative (H. Young, 2005).

The availability of these mass-made souvenirs allows attendees to turn their present, active spiritual experience into a static material object immediately; to commodify their religious experiences before they even leave the building. In buying the objects of religiosity – the books, music, recordings of sermons, even apparel and décor – consumers can demonstrate their religiosity through objects. Christianity becomes something you have in a very real and literal way – it is written on your wrist band, sitting on your coffee table and in your SUV's cd-player. Conceiving Christian identity as things that are owned takes away from an alternative conception: things that are done. While an old hymn says “they’ll know we are Christians by our love,” the market for Christian paraphernalia leads one to wonder if today others only know who are Christians by their stuff. The evidence of Christianity is *only* in commodities, *not* in behavior. That is to say, not only does this consumer framing suggest Christianity can be approached in terms of costs and benefits, but that it can be something one has instead of something one does. While one of these options does not necessarily preclude the other, my fear is that presenting so prominently ways in which faith can be “bought” the more difficult and powerful modes of understanding religious faith will be overlooked for this simpler one, especially in an atmosphere where a consumer approach is affirmed at every turn. As I will elaborate in my next chapter, religion is more productive on its own terms and for society when it is framed as something people practice, not something people possess.

In addition to presenting the opportunity for attendees to buy products, in megachurches the sermon is frequently presented as a consumer object – the main event.

Within that, the message often resembles a sales pitch more than a meditation. That is to say, the element of the sermon is consumerist in two ways: through its presentation as a product, and its promotion of salvation through marketing language. The centrality of the sermon as a consumer product is communicated in a number of ways. First, it is the part of the worship service that takes up the most time. While the service also includes a few songs and a small amount of time devoted to church business,¹¹ the hour-long service is dominated by the sermon. On my February visit, the sermon ended, and the service concluded immediately. While in most churches the sermon is followed by some other liturgical items, most commonly songs of application and a blessing, this service lacked all these elements, clearly extraneous to the central product. On my other visit, in November, a noticeable number of people began leaving the auditorium immediately after the sermon, even though the service continued with singing. This behavior is evidence of an attitude among church members that the sermon is the important product in the worship service – other elements like singing as a community or fellowship after the service are expendable. While the centrality of the sermon, in and of itself, is not unusual or even necessarily problematic (it's a common thread across most protestant traditions), the framing of sermon as main *product* is. The apparent disinterest in other elements of church life indicated by those who leave early or even watch the sermon from home or another location indicates that they view church attendance as a shopping trip – they show up, get the product, then leave. Additionally, satellite churches and additional auditoriums each feature individual live music, but the main product, the sermon, is shared across space and time – through several different services. The

¹¹ On my November visit, one of these business items is a plug for the worship band's new cd, which is for sale.

apparent importance of this specific pastor and his message as a product for everyone is emphasized in the way it is positioned in terms of time, distance and prominence in sales and on the church's website.

The charisma and near-celebrity status of the pastor also indicate the centrality of the sermon as a consumer product. Andy Stanley's Sunday sermon is viewed on all 3 church campuses, and recordings are shown at a dozen satellite churches and "strategic partners" throughout the US. In his February sermon, Stanley noted that "more people will hear me talk about being salt today than heard Jesus talk about it (in the sermon on the mount)." Although he made this statement with disclaimers about humility in order to suggest the power of all the Christians hearing this message to influence the world for the better, the direct comparison of his large audience points to the celebrity status of the minister, and the exchange value of the sermon as cultural capital. Just as the culture industry "above all makes use of the star system, borrowed from individualistic art and its commercial exploitation" (Adorno, 2001 p. 101), so does consumer spirituality rely on the celebrity power of the pastor.

Within the language of the church and the sermon in particular, Christianity is also positioned as a product. In his November sermon, Stanley leads a prayer of commitment suggesting that attendees pray along in order to "finish this deal" and "seal that decision." The resemblance to sealing a business transaction in these phrases is an indication of the way that achieving salvation, or becoming part of a church community is akin to making a business transaction.¹² The product, then, needs to be made as

¹² While metaphors of the marketplace are present in the biblical text, the problem here is that their prevalence and predominance to the exclusion of other metaphors. Also, the Bible never positions believers as consumers of salvation – salvation is a gift, in one passage (I Corinthians 6:20) humans are bought by Jesus' sacrifice. The enlightenment concept of "marketplace of ideas" is likely the one being

appealing as possible. Just as banks construct a respectable-looking building to reassure investors and car dealerships construct an appealing atmosphere to enable sales (Rushkoff, 1999), so does the megachurch construct environments that enable the sale of their brand of Christianity, complete with the co-branding of media and other items. Ultimately, they see their role as producing a sales pitch for a life in the Christian Brand. Rather than enact Christianity, Northpoint's weekend services try to sell it.

As such, the focus is often on the cost of sin, the benefits of belief, and the unique advantages of Christianity. For example, on my February visit the sermon focused on the responsibility of Christians to be moral agents in the world (salt and light, from the sermon on the mount). To this end, Stanley argues repeatedly that the Judeo-Christian worldview is the only source of a moral sense in the world – without Judeo-Christian concepts of equality and forgiveness would not exist in human cultures. He conveniently ignores the historical failings of the church to promote these values and instead focuses on Christianity as a unique source for these virtues. As a listener highly aware of the failings of the church in the application of these virtues, especially his suggestion that Christianity is responsible for the idea that all humans are equally valuable, I found it difficult to accept this optimistic presentation without addressing this major objection to the suggestion that Christians are necessarily the bringers of moral principles to the world. This potentially problematic claim is framed as though it is selling points for the Christian belief system – “buy now and receive our patented morality system, complete with concepts like forgiveness and the equality of all people!” It as though Christianity is

iterated here, as the availability of multiple religious traditions presents people with a variety of options, which has not often been the case in the past (Berger, 1967).

running an exclusive special on knowing what is right. While this is also framed as a responsibility, it is emphasized more as a selling point.

The November sermon I saw was preceded by a video that shows examples of “sin” destroying marriage relationships, and then being worsened by calling repeated bad behavior a “mistake.” Again in this example the wages of sin are bad marriages – an accessible, individual problem that can be solved by buying into Christianity today. While this problem-solution organization is not by any means unique to the megachurch setting, its use in this manner adds to the already predominant model of church as sales pitch.

My additional survey of audio recordings of several other sermons from the church in 2007 demonstrates that Stanley’s content at times presents a more complex understanding of these tensions. He does encourage his listeners to focus their prayers on God’s greatness instead of on themselves and their needs (although does not discuss a focus on other people) and discusses temptations to pursue ones own goals and power to the detriment of God’s plan (however without an emphasis on social justice). These individualistic tendencies of course are not exclusive to North Point church and are common throughout Protestantism. As a symptom of a larger trend, however, they indicate this additional evidence of the pervasiveness of a consumerist understanding of spirituality.

In the same way as parody advertisements, but even more explicitly, selling Christianity in this way minimizes and ignores the sacrifices involved in true religious practice. It also overlooks the broken condition of the contemporary church and the church throughout history. While it may be true that the church has an ideological value

of equality, forgiveness and love for everyone, the history of the church is filled with failures to enact this ideal. While the crusades, American slavery and the subjugation of women are particularly clear examples, this also occurred and continues to occur on smaller levels, as individuals are slighted and ignored by imperfect Christians.

Overlooking the serious problems within the Christian world, and the mysteries, confusion and sacrifices of the Christian life construct a kind of Christianity that might be appealing at first, but misses pressing issues, difficult problems, and possibilities for a rich theology of practice.

Conclusion

Leaders and Pastors of megachurches have good intentions for their work. Pastor Bill and Linda Hybels (Hybels & Hybels, 1995) open their book on Willow Creek Church with a series of tableaux on the way the church should function, many of which include community relationships and generosity. Just as Shane Hipps acknowledges the good that comes from some aspects of megachurches, my position, too, is that most of these people have good intentions but mistaken techniques. Trying to make Christianity appeal to consumers by playing into the consumer paradigm is approaching an important problem from the wrong direction. Christians should be asking how to engage spirituality that transforms lives and societies in a communal, relational way within and in spite of consumer society. Instead, these churches are trying to make Christianity into a product that appeals to consumers, and are in that very transmogrification diminishing its power. I select North Point Church because it is a particularly clear example of some of these trends which are at work, often in more subtle or smaller ways, across protestant churches, and have been for decades. While this example is more extreme than most

others, I believe it is symptomatic, not isolated. These rhetorics of consumption are present in a variety of churches, often without critique.

It would also be remiss not acknowledging that the community created in megachurches can be more personal than the large Sunday service might lead one to believe. All of these churches have a thriving small group system, which is a major part of what keeps people returning. It is within this format that interpersonal relationships grow which I was not able to observe on Sundays. Shane Hipps, however, points out that even within these small groups, the focus is on accountability toward building an individual relationship with God, not toward constructing Christian community. This means that the isolated individual is still privileged above the community, part of the consumer paradigm. Additionally, the model of an ideal Christian constructed in the Sunday service remains the same.

I have argued that megachurches like North Point rhetorically construct spirituality within a consumer paradigm by constructing consumer environments, dividing a church into demographics, identifying with the symbolism of consumption, and suggesting their members participate by consuming media and buying products. These activities construct a model Christian who is isolated from others, especially those different from her, who approaches religion with self-interest and measuring costs against benefits, and who considers consumption the endpoint of practicing religion.

These characteristics of a consumer Christian are contrary to the biblical model that I identify in chapter 1, which stresses that Christians should live as a generous community, seek justice for others even at their own expense, and participate in creation (not only consumption) as those made in the image of God. While I do not believe that

Christians in megachurches fully manifest this consumer model that is rhetorically constructed, the implicit messages within the aesthetic of megachurches invite attendees to become more and more like it. Should not the church do the opposite? They should instead construct communities and spaces and spoken rhetoric that invite Christians and visitors to view the world through a different paradigm – not as consumers, but through the eyes of a God who is a creator, sustainer and redeemer. In the next chapter I will more closely examine the way some Christians attempt to enact this model through worship and through practices of living.

Chapter 3 – Eat this Bread: Christian practices as resistance

In chapter two my concerns about consumer spirituality boiled down to three problems: the paradigmatic consumer Christian is isolated, self-interested and consumes rather than creates. I illustrated how megachurch worship creates conditions that encourage these vices within their communities. These attitudes are opposed to the virtues I outlined in the first chapter of Christian community, seeking justice and creating a people made in the image of God. Beyond the Christian community, these characteristics are negative for the larger community as well. Isolation and self-interest create problems for democracy and healthy community, when people are not concerned with the viewpoints of others or the sacrifices that are made for the good of the community. As Adorno and Debord argue, following Marx, consumption inhibits human creativity, causing people to be isolated from their work, from the process of production and from each other. This problem becomes a particularly acute when spirituality becomes a commodity. If people are isolated from the elements of worship, prayer and religious meaning, then the meaning of that spirituality is diminished – it becomes simply a product for consumption rather than a set of beliefs to be acted upon. In addition, by constructing a consumer model of spirituality, the calls to the church to be productive of community and of justice are also diminished. This is not merely a problem for the church but for all cultures touched by capitalism, as is indicated by the arguments of scholars in the Frankfurt school and many others.

Examining potential solutions within the Christian church tradition can help us imagine possible answers to these larger social problems. Putnam (2000) indicates that

more general trends toward lower involvement in community events, trust among neighbors and philanthropy are less pronounced among church-goers, since such practices have been a part of Christian tradition for 2000 years, and for even longer within the Jewish community. These practices guided the way Christian communities interacted before today's technologies intensified the problems many critics identify in the broader culture (Adorno, 2001; Debord, 1967; McLuhan, 1965). Looking to these practices and to the ways they continue to be implemented within Christian communities today may provide clues to ways in which our larger communities might remediate some of the costs of consumer society. In other words, I want to understand Christian practice on its own terms as a source of invention for those outside of the Christian tradition who are concerned about the costs of consumerism.

In this chapter, then, I will examine practice as rhetoric and as situated within Christian communities. I examine how two practices of community resist consumerist attitudes: hospitality and community-generated worship. I look especially to the writings and practices of those in the emerging church movement, because these Christians approach ecclesiology and liturgy with specific attentiveness to the unique problems and opportunities of contemporary society, and often as a particular reaction to the problems of the megachurch.

A Theory of Practice

As a rhetorical form, practice is unique, but also shares some aspects with forms that have been examined more closely by rhetorical scholars. First, practice involves material, embodied action – much like the embodied activism that many scholars examine in protests, rallies and public events (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; Enck-Wanzer,

2006; Marvin & Simonson, 2004). However, practices are also distinct from these *events* because practices do not take place at a single discrete moment in time. Instead, practices take place across time; their repetition and consistency is an important part of their power. These differences mean that practices are a unique rhetorical form that must be examined on their own terms. In this section, I develop a theory of practice, focusing on its unique functions and characteristics. .

First, practice is difficult to mediate, because it is not an event. While media respond most easily to image-events – staged spectacles that are unusual and provoke comment (DeLuca, 1999), practices function in the opposite way by becoming ordinary. Instead of persuading through electronic and print media, practice works through the media of people and communities. In practice, the narratives, values and goals of the community are performed through the daily lives of the people and are disseminated not through electronic broadcast but through relationships. For example, the practice of Sabbath keeping is generally not newsworthy, but the values inherent in communities who have strict Sabbath practices become clear to those who develop relationships with people within those communities. When one works with observant Jews or Seventh Day Adventists, for example, one learns about their religious observance by noticing their unwillingness to take extra shifts on Saturdays. Outsiders learn about beliefs through their contact with individual believers and believing communities.

The very term “practice” is instructive: the Oxford English Dictionary includes seven discrete meanings for this word. Most helpful definitions include 1) the application or use of an idea (“it works in theory and in practice”) 2) repeated performance of an activity (“practice makes perfect”) 3) to carry out a profession (a medical or law practice)

4) the habitual doing or carrying on of something. While the final definition is obviously closest to the sense of practice I am concerned with here, the other meanings also illuminate aspects of its meaning. Practices help people to apply or perform ideas, to rehearse in order to become more like the person they would like to be, and to perform some part of their identity. All of these characteristics – applying ideas, performing identity, and striving to become better – are aspects of how practices function.

As this multifaceted definition may indicate, I believe practices are particularly rhizomatic. As Deleuze and Guattari theorize (1980/1987), a rhizome is an interconnected network with multiple points of entry and no clear hierarchy or center. While Deleuze and Guattari focus on this metaphor to depict texts and ideas, their concept is open enough to also include ways of living as I do here. Practices interact with texts, bodies, ideas, narratives, images and places in multiple ways. Because they function in this way, practices have meaning in different ways for different people in different contexts. While the same act or sort of act may be repeated across time, each performance has the potential to reveal or construct a new meaning. Additionally, the meanings that this practice has had in the past for a particular person or community impact the meaning that the practice has in the present.¹³

Because of these characteristics, examining practices provides both challenges and opportunities for the critic. Their rhizomatic nature means that practices can mean in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways across time and context and even within the same time and context. While a rhetorical critic never delivers a definitive reading of any text, texts whose very strength is in their openness of meaning draw particular attention

¹³ In this way, practices are similar to ideographs (McGee, 1980) – terms in discourse whose meanings are complex and weighted with the meanings they have signified across time.

to the limits of an individual critic's perspective. This might lead one to despair that the work of the critic is hopeless; I would suggest that it is simply humble. While a critic can never identify all the multiple meanings and points of entry, there is still insight to be had in showing a few. "The multiple *must be made*, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety, with the number of dimensions one already has available – always $n-1$ " (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 6). That is to say, subjects take their own perspective from the multiple and look at others from that vantage. Reading a rhizome is itself a practice of unfolding and becoming, showing new possibilities and connections by obtaining a new vantage point. "To be rhizomorphic is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 15). For Deleuze and Guattari, these "strange new uses" are part of the productivity of the rhizome – that these points of intersection can be actively redirected or naturally appear in unexpected ways. In this chapter, I plan to observe ways in which Christian practices may be put to strange new uses within a consumerist society, connecting with religious tradition and contemporary culture.

Michel de Certeau examines practices in a similar way; he looks at the ways practices concentrate meaning and resist authoritative control. He writes, "these 'ways of operating' constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production" (Certeau, 1984, p. xiv). De Certeau is interested in the everyday practices by which ordinary people, or the "dominated element" (p. xii), re-appropriate things, spaces, time and their own bodies from those in power. He examines the procedures ordinary people enact to construct a

meaningful life within consumerism. I here apply to the practices of the Christian church de Certeau's explanation of "poetic ways of 'making do'" (p xv). While I follow de Certeau in looking for small ways that people find liberations from consumerism, I also am interested in how these ways intersect with spirituality, and how these practices "make do" with human fallibility, pride and selfishness.

In Christianity practices often serve an eschatological function (that is, looking forward to the end of time and the renewal of the earth) – pointing to and striving for a renewed earth where relationships and individuals are perfected; "a space for... utopian points of reference" (p 18) in de Certeau's terms. While in de Certeau's theory practices envision a free and perfect human community, within a Christian worldview that perfect community becomes instead the one brought by God's power in the new earth.¹⁴ But while pointing toward a future or unattainable perfection, it also relies on "accumulated time" (Certeau, 1984, p. 83). That is to say, the impact of practice is not all at once, but in iteration. Similarly, its power at one moment is through the accumulated power of previous time spent. Because of this accumulation of time, meaning is also multi-faceted. "Its presence causes distortions generated in the situation considered by the bringing together of qualitatively heterogeneous dimensions" (p 84). This distortion occurs because past meaning becomes less specific and more open as time passes, and because multiple meanings interact with each other to create new or ambiguous meanings. For example, the Christmas Holiday retains meanings from the Biblical account of the birth of Christ, from pagan winter holidays, from Ebenezer Scrooge and *It's a Wonderful Life*.

¹⁴ I use the term "new earth" here where others might use the term "heaven." I choose this terminology to be consonant with the "New Jerusalem" language in the book of revelation. I also believe that using the term "heaven" eschatologically creates an other-worldly theology that minimizes materiality, which is problematic for those concerned with justice and the environment, and with biblical accuracy (Granberg-Michaelson, 1984).

These various texts and events across time all influence the contemporary meaning of Christmas, and add to its power. Each of these meanings is distorted, however, because of its interaction and competition with other sources of meaning for the same event – that is, the celebration of Christmas. The combination of concentrated and distorted meaning is what makes practices powerful in de Certeau’s view. He believes that the accumulated meaning in practices gives it more effects than rhetoric or action without this accumulated meaning. Additionally, the distortion creates meanings that are flexible and able to be applied and interpreted differently as the context demands.

Adding to those views, the theologians I reviewed in the introduction also emphasize the necessity that practices take place within a community – that they become meaningful among a group. They also echo the formative and material aspects of practice that are also highlighted by the other views I discuss here.

My view of practice thus includes several functions: 1) creation/performance of identity within a community 2) formation of character 3) powerful embodiment or performance of beliefs 4) symbolic and corporeal reference to utopian or eschatological society within an imperfect context 5) concentrated multiple meaning accumulated over time. In this chapter, I consider two Christian practices – hospitality and participation in worship – and the ways that they might be “put to strange new uses” in resistance to consumerism. I acknowledge that these practices can and do mean in multiple ways—and sometimes in opposite ways—distinct from my reading. Viewing these Christian practices through a counter-consumer frame, however, may illuminate opportunities and inventional resources available to individuals to combat the negative effects of consumerism both for Christians and for society as a whole. In addition, this analysis of

Christian practice functions as a case study to help rhetorical critics better understand the role of a variety of practices in communities, activism and ideology.

Christian Practices

Before we examine particular practices, it is useful to understand the way practices function in various Judeo-Christian traditions. This will also help us to understand why they might be more often absent in the megachurch. The relationship of belief and action is one that is situated differently in different Judeo-Christian traditions. Lauren Winner, an essayist and historian who converted to Judaism and then to Anglican Christianity, suggests that practices are more central to Judaism than to Christianity – that “practice is to Judaism what belief is to Christianity” (Winner, 2003, p. ix). She explains this distinction more precisely by saying, “Spiritual practices don’t justify us. They don’t save us. Rather, they refine our Christianity... Practicing the spiritual disciplines does not make us Christians. Instead, the practicing teaches us what it means to live as Christians” (p. xii). In her book, she uses this idea to help translate Jewish practices into Christian terms. This distinction in the meaning of practice within Judaism and Christianity is instructive in understanding the aversion some Christians have to focusing on practice as they focus instead on the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. This distinction is particularly strong among Protestants, who are in part critical of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians for their theology of practice. Protestants fear that an emphasis on practices like Lenten fasting or attending the mass creates a danger of believing that people can earn salvation through good works and perfect practice, rather than relying on God.

It is this Protestant tradition that leads to worship of the kind found in churches like North Point that I examined in the last chapter. While their worship does feature similar elements week after week, those elements are not imbued with spiritual significance in the way that the Sacred Liturgy is for Catholics or the lighting of Sabbath candles is for Jews. In these latter traditions, the very performance of these activities is meaningful, not only for God and the performer, but as a symbolic action on behalf of the church universal or potentially all of humanity. Media theorist and converted Catholic Marshall McLuhan explained this understanding in a letter to his (Protestant) fiancée: “So in going to mass and assisting at that bloodless sacrifice, one is simply applying the merits of Christ either to oneself or, as the phrase goes, to one’s ‘friends and benefactors,’ known and unknown. And nothing could be more natural when it is realized that the Church is strictly a society, though supernatural in character” (McLuhan, 1939/1999, p. 25). In Catholic theology, then, the act of the mass is an important act of faith whose power reaches beyond just those who participate.

In contrast, Protestant theology emphasizes an internal belief over any kind of exterior action or “good works.” While most Protestants will suggest that Christian practice or good works are the fruit of the spirit of God within a person, these actions are evidence of salvation, not the source of it. The Heidelberg Catechism, a document expressing typical Protestant doctrines, contains a question and answer making this accusation. It says, “The mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered to them daily by the priests” (Ursinus & Olevianus, 1563/1975). Many contemporary reformed churches that still use this catechism have either removed this portion, or added a footnote explaining

that this is a misunderstanding of Catholic doctrine, but also add that this portion “still contains a pointed warning against any teachings, attitudes, and practices related to the Eucharist that obscure the finality and sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and detract from proper worship of the ascended Lord” (*CRCNA Synod Report*, 2004). This explanation indicates the continued fear that valuing consistent practice may be confused as straying from the doctrine of salvation by grace. Because of this doctrine and history, many Protestant and Evangelical churches do not perform the Eucharist weekly, or other practices like fasting, attention to the Sabbath and confession. While Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have the mass as the center of their Sunday worship, Protestant churches tend to focus instead on preaching.¹⁵ While many Protestant churches also include other elements from the divine liturgy, such as confession of sins and assurance of pardon, others do not. As I described in the previous chapter, Protestant megachurches like North Point Community Church reflect this trend in an extreme way by making the sermon almost the entire service and certainly the most important part. Similarly, while more practice-oriented traditions include practices of devotion as part of the Christian life aside from attending worship, for Protestants the primary action demonstrating one's faith is evangelism, a similar act of repeating or proclaiming beliefs.

Given this history, it is somewhat curious that books like Winner's have gained popularity among evangelicals. The emerging church movement,¹⁶ for example, has

¹⁵ This is a simplification of the variety of liturgies within Christendom, and even within different churches from the same tradition. Most obviously, the Anglican and Episcopal churches also celebrate communion weekly.

¹⁶ Many emerging church members, leaders, writers and observers are hesitant to refer to a movement and prefer the term “conversation” because it is heterogeneous and diffuse and lacks a centralizing ideology. Emerging churches are characterized by a shared frustration with contemporary evangelicalism, a desire to experiment with new modes of worship and ecclesiology, and a close examination of what it means to be the church in a “postmodern” culture. Useful characterizations of such churches can be found in Gibbs and

taken an interest in the elements of historic Christianity that Protestantism tends to reject. Among these are historic Christian practices, like participatory worship, community prayer, meditation, visual elements, hospitality and intentional community. Some of the motivation for this may be in the stripped down, consumerized version of religiosity offered by megachurches. Members of Generation X, in particular, are disillusioned by a church that looks like everything else they encounter in the commercial world from day to day. They look to the church, instead, for a different model of living and understanding life. Christian practices offer a helpful way to understand the Christian life outside of the paradigms of consumerism.

In the next section of this chapter I focus on the practices of community in one emerging church: Tribe of Los Angeles¹⁷, while supplementing with anecdotes from other texts and experiences. My goal is to find ways that practices of Christian community can resist the negative effects of consumer spirituality, and more broadly of consumer society.

Practices of Community

The importance of community to the members and leaders of Tribe is apparent in a number of their practices. Before their Sunday evening worship service begins, members are busy preparing the worship space with chairs, percussion instruments, sound and projection equipment and elements of communion.¹⁸ Others work in the nearby kitchen preparing food, coffee, and setting a long table for the community meal.

Bolger's *Emerging Churches* (2005) and of the related popular and theological literature in Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (2005).

¹⁷ I choose Tribe in particular because it is a good exemplar of an emerging church (and it is used in other work on emerging churches) and because it is a congregation that I have particular access to through friends.

¹⁸ My understanding of Tribe comes from many conversations with James Gilmore and other church members. I also visited the church on January 8, April 6 (for Maunday Thursday) and April 8 in 2007.

As other members arrive they help with set up and chat with each other. General attendance is between 20 and 50 people, some arriving late or leaving early. The Sunday service consists of a shared meal and then a worship service.

Pastor Rebecca Ver Straten McSparran described a typical service in an interview:

“As we get started, we always sit in a circle. Our typical service is very liturgical... The drums start, and we call everyone together. We sing one song, and we light the Christ candle as a poem is read. We do congregational drumming, or Taizé,¹⁹ or guitar, but usually drumming. Someone prays. I might lead a prayer of confession, or others might take turns. It might be an artistic/community prayer. Often we break into groups for prayer... Sometimes the sermon is art, and sometimes I don't speak. But when I do, I start with a reading from the Word and I read Scripture through *lectio divina*. My preaching is fairly dialogical, and I engage where people are at. We have a time of meditation that lasts about twenty minutes... We gather everyone for communion, the words of institution. We use wine, pass the cup around, and say the Lord's Prayer together...” (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005, p. 225)

Practicing community is an important part of the community identity at Tribe, and that is reinforced through community activities besides the Sunday worship service and the manner in which their Sunday gatherings are carried out. The form and content of Tribe worship suggests a fundamentally different priority from that of North Point, and therefore constructs a different experience. Instead of creating an environment designed to equip individuals to be Christians elsewhere, Tribe invites members to join in building

¹⁹ Taizé is a style of sung prayer that originates in the Taizé community in France. It consists of repeated simple choruses in latin and translated to other languages, usually accompanied by a few instruments.

a community, in understanding a complex spirituality, and in practicing that spirituality in creative ways. Important parts of enacting their spirituality take place within the practices of church community itself. This community building takes place through particular practices over time. These include practices of hospitality and community worship.

Building Community: Practices of Hospitality

Having a meal together is perhaps the simplest practice of community in many contexts, and it is central to the community practice at Tribe. Sunday services not only include the sacrament of the Lord's Supper – a highly ritualized community meal in some sense – but also a shared dinner. Eating together is a weekly part of Tribe's practice of community, but is also a common experience in many Christian churches and in other communities as well – from potluck casseroles in the American Midwest to the hospitality practices in the Middle East. In this section I will examine the ways that this practice of hospitality allows practitioners to form and perform identity, embody their beliefs in an eschatological way, and construct accumulated meaning. I will also explore the ways this functions differently from consumer spirituality, as it invites members and visitors to become ideal Christians who are generous, relational, and communal instead of self-interested and isolated.

Eating together, like other practices, is rhizomatic because of its multiple entry points and resonances with other times and places. Sharing a meal is a particularly helpful example for this aspect of practice because it is so common. We must eat to survive, therefore sharing a meal is an experience everyone can relate to, although perhaps some eat with other people more often than others. As I have already discussed,

one of the ways practices like a community meal work is through providing multiple entry points – different ways for people to understand the event or connect it to other systems of meaning. It also functions as an opportunity to construct and perform identity as a community or “church family,” as an enactment of beliefs about the sacrament and of eschatological hope. These characteristics of practice also function to resist the isolation and selfishness that are characteristic of consumer society.

One entry point for the community meal is its resonance with the archetypal family meal. By sharing a meal as a community, practitioners draw comparisons to the cultural archetype of a family. This is a rhetorical act, because it functions to establish group identity and behavioral norms that are appropriate within this identity. While church congregations are often referred to as a “church family” or “family of God” this act of sharing a meal is one way of performing that identity. It is an embodied way of saying “we consider ourselves a family in faith, and we are going to act like it.” Even as this family identity is performed, it is also formed. Participants begin to consider other members as someone with a family-like relationship because of the way they interact – by eating together, serving each other, feeding each other and helping to clean up. In addition these relationships are deepened and concretized because the table is a place for casual conversation and getting to know others. Relationships are formed because of this performance of relationality. That is to say that while members are using the practice to perform their identity as members of a community, that same identity is being formed.

While a family meal is one possible resonance or accumulated meaning for a community meal, there are other entry points as well. For example, a weekly meal (or some other schedule) soon not only means by metaphor or comparison, but by the

accumulation of its own history. By repeating the practice, the community recalls other meals, conversations and stories. When a practice is repeated regularly like a community meal, soon the meal itself invokes the history of that community through those past meals. While one dinner is not particularly significant for building relationships or creating a community identity, many meals over months and years are – it is within *iteration* that this practice, like others, becomes powerful.²⁰

Another entry point for a meal with a worship service is the way it recalls Communion. At Tribe weekly worship always includes the sacrament, and the meal together foreshadows the spiritual meal that is to come. In fact, most weeks at Tribe, this sacramental meal is practiced as bookends to the entire meal – it begins with the bread and ends with the cup. This practice makes the connection between the community meal and the spiritual meal not only metaphorical but temporal – they occur together. There are several words used for this sacrament: the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, the mass; communion is perhaps the most evocative of the ideas I am appealing to here because it emphasizes the communal nature of the sacrament – that within communion a congregation *communes* with God and with each other.

In fact, in some traditions the liturgy includes the statement by the minister that “we who are many are one body, for we all share the same loaf” and that “the cup which we drink is our participation in the blood of Christ.”²¹ The sacrament of communion therefore affirms the identity of the congregation as those who are one church body and who participate in the death of Christ for their salvation. This participation is both

²⁰ Like any powerful rhetorical strategy, iteration also closes off other possibilities. Theorists like Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida examine this tendency more closely.

²¹ This particular wording comes from the form for the Christian Reformed Church, but many forms include these sentiments.

spiritual and literal, as the members signify this participation not only by speaking parts of the liturgy but by physically consuming the elements. This profound and mysterious meal of communion is the central act of the liturgy in many traditions. Tribe's shared informal meal as a congregation prefigures this sacrament and thus finds meaning in conjunction with it. The communal significance of the sacrament animates the meal with similar significance. The identity as community that I discussed earlier is caught up into the spiritual identity enacted in the sacrament. The practice functions in this way to actualize belief – both the beliefs in the mysterious power of the sacrament and in the identity as community that is formed and performed within the sacrament, and amplified by the practice of a community meal.

Additionally, it is in this connection of the sacrament with the spiritual community that the eschatological meaning of the meal unfolds. Theologian Martha Moore-Keish writes, “Christian eschatology affirms not only that we have hope that God will triumph over evil in some future time, but also that we participate already in that future. One way in which we participate in God’s future now is by coming to the table to ‘proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes again’” (2005, p. 111). This participation in a future kingdom is the Christian counterpart to the “space for utopian points of reference” that de Certeau references. Moore-Keish continues “the bread broken and shared at the communion table draws people together into one and anticipates the time when all people will come together into God’s universal reign” (p. 117). In this way, the communion table, and by extension the dinner table, functions as a “point of reference” for the global, perfect community that Christians anticipate with hope. By participating in this event that simultaneously enacts and longs for community and justice, congregants

create for themselves a referent for this hope. This forward-looking hope in and of itself undermines consumer culture, which focuses on the needs of the individual in the present moment. Additionally, it is a justice-minded hope that is concerned with the plight of others and with the evils that divide people from each other. This concern for peace instead of competition also undermines the self-interest, isolation and perpetual discontent that consumer culture cultivates.

While the entry points to a community meal will be various and individualized, these three examples demonstrate how the meal functions as practice – constructing and enacting identity as a spiritual community, by relying on accumulated time, by creating a point of reference to eschatology and by forming practitioners into communal people through the act of practicing. This practice of community functions also to combat the isolation that is problematic in consumer spirituality and in consumer culture as a whole. The practice of a community meal invites members and visitors to think of themselves as members of a community, and to develop relationships. This is a marked difference from the atmosphere of megachurches, which invite members and visitors to look toward a stage or screen instead of each other, and construct crowded, efficiency-oriented patterns that discourage conversation and relationships. This practice not only makes individuals less isolated, but also necessarily makes them less self-interested. Constructing community makes individuals more attuned to the needs of others, rather than only their own needs and the costs and benefits to themselves. While this combats isolation and self-interest, this single practice does not counteract all of the concerns I have associated with consumer spirituality. In the next section, I look to the practice of participatory

worship, which functions sometimes similarly and also differently from the practice of a community meal.

Practicing Participatory Worship

Theologian/Sociologists Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger used interviews with leaders of emerging churches in the US and the UK to compose a list of nine defining characteristics in their book *Emerging Churches* (2005). Two of those characteristics – living in community and welcoming the stranger, are related to the previous section. Two others are important in community worship – creating as created beings and leading as a body. In emerging churches such as Tribe, it is important to the community that they create unique creative worship elements that reflect the gifts and cultural location of that specific congregation. Instead of using media or materials produced in centralized large churches or professional organizations, emerging churches prefer to use arts and crafts that incorporate the talents of their congregation. Gibbs and Bolger write that when “each person is empowered to express and develop his or her gifts, increasing diversity can be expressed resulting in both creativity and ownership” (p. 189). This makes the events that take place in a particular church local and unique, and it also means that the people who are present affect the tone and content of events. Instead of slick visual effects and high-tech multimedia that are often part of worship at a megachurch, in emerging churches, arts and technologies are chosen to reflect the gifts and service of particular members. The practice of participatory worship, like the community meal, functions as a practice to combat the problems of consumer spirituality.

This practice has two immediate outcomes: it creates a unique worship, and it makes specific individuals integral to the communal product of worship. Instead of

consuming pre-made media and a sermon, members create a meaningful experience for themselves and others through their participation. This can take place in auspicious ways, such as in the writing of music, liturgy, painting, or building installation art, but it can also take place in modest ways, like congregational singing, shared reading or congregational prayer. At Tribe, for instance, singing often takes place in a drum circle. Although there is one leader directing the movement of the song, anyone is invited to pick up a drum or shaker and join in. Each individual present changes the congregational sound. This practice combats the distancing effects of consumer spirituality, but also functions in the rhizomatic ways that practices do. Sharing in the creation of worship in this way, like participation in a community meal, affirms and forms the participant's identity as a member of this religious community, and as a part of the church universal. Additionally, communal worship, like communion, prefigures the perfect world of the eschaton; one of the activities included in Revelation's depiction of the New Earth is praise singing, and another aspect is harmonious community.²² By taking part in weekly worship, then, Christians enact their belief in this eschatology both by prefiguring it and simultaneously rehearsing (i.e. practicing) for their future participation in that kingdom.

In addition to these larger functions as a practice, participatory worship also functions to resist consumer spirituality. The sort of person who is formed by participatory worship is fundamentally different from the person formed by consumer worship. Participation invites a worshipper to ask "what is there that I can *add* to this experience?" while consumer worshippers ask "what can I *take away* from this experience?" This fundamental change in orientation empowers community members to view spirituality as something they construct that has unlimited possibilities and will

²² Revelation 4:8

change to fit in the context of time, place and people. This open, rhizomatic approach to worship does not enable members to consider spirituality something that can be bought, recorded, or simplified into bullet points. Instead, it encourages participants to take a creative, responsive role and to grow in awareness of the needs of others in their community. Instead of conducting a cost/benefit analysis for themselves, they are invited to consider what they might do to improve the experience of others, and what unique perspective they might add.

This de-centralized leadership also means that members of the congregation can contribute elements that offer new meanings for the practices of the community, for the biblical texts they use, and for the subsequent understanding of Christianity. This means that while the community's core beliefs and values are likely to endure, they are not necessarily static or immutable. Rather than a single charismatic preacher offering a simple, authoritative understanding, community-led worship means that meanings are open and mystery is more imminent. In other words, the communal hermeneutic through art, prayer, and discussion allows the biblical text to also be seen as rhizomatic, and lets new meanings be unfolded when a new perspective is applied. Theologians Stanley Grenz and John Franke take an analogous approach to biblical texts. They understand that, "the Spirit speaks by 'appropriating' the biblical text itself" (Grenz & Franke, 2001, p. 74). This is to say that the work of God through the Bible is not static, but contextual. "The spirit speaks to succeeding generations of Christians through the text" (p. 66) and the meaning to these different generations in different places may look very different in different contexts.

When the meaning of scripture is rhizomatic, it becomes more appropriate to ponder mysteries, hold continuing discussions, and approach it as a difficult text, rather than a clear manual for belief. This approach to the biblical text and Christian belief makes theology a difficult process, much like the speculative moment that Adorno suggests as the antidote to the isolation and mental numbness produced by the culture industry. In addition, making hermeneutics a part of the work of the people (a literal translation of the word liturgy, incidentally) means that the understanding of Christianity becomes something to be made rather than consumed. Instead of a sermon as a bit of spirituality to be recorded and brought home, it is an artifact of collective and continued pondering.

Finally, approaching worship as a communal effort to which everyone contributes reinforces the potential meanings I discussed for a community meal – that the identity of the congregation as a communal body is more important than as individuals. Worship is not a consumption of the work of one, but a project for the many. This is an additional way of both forming and performing identity for individuals as a part of a community who can learn from others and who has something to contribute.

Conclusion

To summarize, the practice of participative worship helps participants to perform an identity as part of a community, and simultaneously become more like the communal persons they wish to be. In addition, it makes religious meaning something that is constructed by a community of people in a particular context, one that is open to new insights and, by faith to the work of the Holy Spirit. Relatedly, the practice functions eschatologically, looking ahead to a sinless new earth. These aspects of participative

worship also function to resist the effects of consumer spirituality. Rather than viewing a religious event as a static product for an individual to consume, it becomes a time to negotiate meaning within the context of relationships. This framework is a resistive alternative that combats the culture industry's tendency toward isolation, selfishness, and approaching everything as a product to be consumed rather than engaged.

The practice of sharing a meal functions similarly. It creates opportunity to build meaningful relationships, to retell the stories that define a community, to serve others and to perform the shared identity as a religious community. This practice stands in stark contrast to the framework for religiosity presented in the megachurch, which focuses on expedited experience of an environment – everything from the count-down clock to the service to the parking assistants indicates a value of efficiency. A community meal is anything but efficient. It is relaxed, slow, and requires people to be patient and aware of the needs of others. This fundamentally communal experience functions, like participative worship, as a form of resistance to the power of consumerism. While eating is, at its most basic, consumption, eating as a community resists the temptation to approach everything through the framework of *consumerism*, which focuses on personal needs and wants over communal ones, tends to isolate people and discourage creativity or serious engagement with ideas, art, or belief.

Both of these practices do not defeat the need for consumption, or the power of the culture industry in our lives, but they allow a space for clear resistance. They offer an alternative framework and a particular, repeated gesture that can be made to both proclaim and reinforce that framework to those who believe it is important, and to those

they wish to share it with. This chapter shows how practices function in the context of a religious community to resist consumer spirituality.

Finally, the rhizomatic nature of practices show why the potential and various meanings within them influence other cultural texts and people outside of the community in which they are practiced. Additionally, the concept of rhizome helps us to understand how some aspects of religious practice might map into other kinds of activist communities. While the religious meaning of a practice is unlikely to be iterated within secular communities, other values and effects of these kinds of practices might become even more important from that vantage. For example, the importance of interpersonal relationships and serving each other that comes from a community meal is important in many contexts outside of the Christian church.

This project serves as a case study to more closely examine the ways practices function within communities, and to what end. In addition, it demonstrates how approaching spirituality in terms of practice is concretely different from viewing it as a product, and what benefits might come from that change. This approach may be productive in other contexts as well. These implications will be developed further in my final chapter.

Chapter 4 – Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I have critiqued the use of the consumer frame for religion and spirituality, and suggested the frame of religious practice as a resistive alternative. These assertions have implications in a number of areas for rhetorical theory and criticism, for Christianity, and for activists. For rhetoricians, this project offers a close examination of religious space, and of consumer spirituality in addition to adding to the growing body of work on practices of resistance and theories of practice. For Christianity, this project urges a re-examination of the pervasive embrace of consumerism and consumer frames for religious events and ideas. Finally, for activists, it suggests that more attention may need to be given to the Christian tradition as a source of invention, and to the rhetorical power of practices.

Implications for rhetorical theory

This project offers several implications for the work of rhetoricians. First, it offers a close examination of the impact of religious spaces. While other critics have examined the arguments made by places such as monuments or commercial spaces, few rhetoricians have examined the way religious spaces make arguments about spiritual and material conditions. As I argued in chapter one, religious beliefs have an impact on the ways people relate to other people, to politics and to culture. Many Americans attend church weekly, and even more at least once a month (49.2% according to a 2005 Baylor survey (*Baylor Religion Survey*, 2006)), and the impact of these religious spaces on their understanding of their religion and their relationship to it is likely significant, due to this repeated exposure. My study centers around the messages created in one particular

religious space: North Point Community Church. As my analysis reveals, sometimes institutional messages sent by a building or parking lot reinforce or contradict verbal messages, and in my analysis they guide interpretation of verbal messages, particularly those about how church attenders should respond to the week's worship.

As with any critical project, reading a religious space has limitations. Given the relatively brief precedent on interpreting spaces rhetorically, there are few norms or standards for understanding the ways in which a space argues. This means that critics rely more heavily on their own impressions and interpretations, making critical readings subjective. Of course, all critical work is subjective, but in this case especially the view of one critic should be joined with other perspectives to reach a fuller understanding.

Secondly, this project adds to existing work about American consumerism by focusing on consumer spirituality. While others have examined the ways that branding and marketing sell religiosity and spirituality (and the way American Christians have become a marketing and voting demographic) my project has a tighter focus. By examining the way spirituality is framed as a consumer product, I join with other scholars who argue that the frame of consumerism has become too invasive (Adorno, 2001; Anderson & Stewart, 2005; Debord, 1967; Lasn, 1999). I examine spirituality in particular because one might expect that spirituality would resist commodification. However, as my analysis indicates, consumer spirituality not only exists, but is very popular among American Evangelicals. This serves as further evidence of the pervasiveness of consumer frames in American cultural discourse, and of its potentially detrimental effects.

On a more theoretical note, this project combines existing theory on the functions and productivity of practice as a form of rhetoric. Rhetorical criticism of practices is challenging, because practices are across time and in many ways extra-textual. Despite these challenges, I maintain that it is an important form of embodied rhetoric that rhetoricians should attend to.²³ As I discussed in chapter 3, practice has a number of important functions. It allows practitioners to enact identity and values at the same time as they become more like that ideal identity they claim. It also provides an eschatological or utopian vision of a better world, and has meaning in concentrated and multiple ways across time. Further theoretical and critical work examining the unique affects of practice in other contexts would enrich this area, especially practices in non-Christian religions, and non-religious practices.

Finally, this study adds to a growing body of work that examines forms and styles of cultural resistance. I suggest here that practice is an important aspect of the ways in which people, by constructing their own cultural values, can resist dominant values that might be imposed upon them. This work, in concert with other work on cultural resistance, adds to a fuller understanding of how resistance takes place and is communicated to others. As I argue in the previous chapters, I believe that small forms of resistance across time are a powerful force for change and a powerful mode to communicate values to outsiders.

Implications for Christians

In addition to implications for rhetorical scholars, this work presents implications for the Christian community and Christian churches. Both the critiques made in my

²³ My colleague Lisa Slawter's MA thesis on the greenbelt movement is a notable exception here.

second chapter and the alternatives proposed in my third are important for church members and leaders to consider in the contexts of their own communities.

As I argue in chapter 2, consumer spirituality is very common in American Christianity, and especially in evangelicalism. While this is a symptom of a larger consumerism problem, its implications for religious belief ought to be especially troubling. The selfishness, isolation and desire to gain that are characteristic of consumer spirituality run directly counter to Christian virtues of community, love and sacrifice. This commitment to consumer values and capitalism are blatant in some evangelical discourse not addressed in my critique, such as the prosperity gospel represented by Joel Osteen and Bruce Wilkinson's *Prayer of Jabez* books. I find this understanding of Christianity deeply problematic. This view also exists, as my analysis reveals, in more subtle and aesthetic forms. Megachurches like North Point church imply that Christianity is something that can be approached using consumer frames through spatial, visual and verbal cues.

While I chose a megachurch for this analysis because I believe it is a site where many of these rhetorics are amplified, they are pervasive in contemporary Christianity, and especially in contemporary evangelical discourse. Many churches and other Christian groups attempt to be relevant and accessible by inviting audiences to approach, evaluate and respond to religious content using consumer frames. This happens in the verbal content of sermons and presentations of the benefits of Christian faith. Focusing only on individual benefits of Christianity in many ways contradicts the teachings of Scripture. In an extreme example, Job's faithfulness gets him poverty, boils and abandonment – that is not something likely to show up in a commercial. Presenting

Christianity without acknowledging its difficulties and historical problems is not only dishonest, but likely to make those who buy into the consumer vision feel disappointed and even betrayed when they do not receive all the blessings promised in *The Prayer of Jabez*. The negative effects of consumer frames for religion go even further; while religion has historically been a force for compassion, generosity and kindness within various cultures, consumer spirituality does not encourage any of those things unless they result in a net gain. A sacrificing vision of Christianity with an eye toward justice could have a significant impact on the world at large. Self-interest undermines that vision, and instead allows Christians to ignore global injustices so long as they are among those reaping the benefits. If religion doesn't motivate people to behave virtuously, what will?

Given that consumer spirituality is ultimately negative for the church, individuals and society, church leaders should attend to the ways their own churches present their identity spatially, visually and aesthetically. By planning church buildings in ways that encourage conversation and interaction, churches foster community. Worship leaders and pastors can foster participation by making tools available that enable congregation members to participate in simple ways in the worship of the church. Leaders should signal that members are invited and encouraged to participate, and make participation possible by providing the necessary textual and visual cues. Leaders should also provide opportunities for members with a variety of gifts to add to the worship of the church or other aspects of church life.

The example of Tribe is instructive in thinking through some community practices that create an atmosphere of participation and value of community. I also urge churches to begin daughter congregations when their numbers become too large to

facilitate close-knit community and universal participation. One reason Tribe is so much more personal and participatory than North Point is because the size of North Point makes those practices untenable – a 10,000 person community meal would be cumbersome and awkward, perhaps so much that it would undermine the other productive meanings of the same event with a smaller group.

While I have offered concrete suggestions on this topic, I also believe that specific criticism and solutions need to take place at the level of the individual community. Contextual factors and individuals within communities will affect the tenability of any proposed solution, and the task of creating a participative community must also be participative. These suggestions, then, are only a starting point for unique communities to prayerfully consider their own location in consumer spirituality and potential forms of resistance.

Implications for Activists and Citizens

Many activists are concerned with the ways that items in people's daily lives have a larger, even global, impact. Among these are activists concerned with consumerism, global justice, and the environment. For these sorts of problems, I suggest that community practices are a useful rhetorical tool. Practices not only change the way individuals behave, but also the way they understand their behavior and communicate about it to others. Also, community practices are a useful way for activist groups to enact their values in a rhizomatic and engaging way. Some environmental groups are already using the rhetoric of practice in creative ways, including tree planting, slow food and buy local movements. Activist communities who champion Buy Local are already practicing in a way that recalls the community meal I discuss in chapter 3. Environmental activists

also believe in the importance of building relationships, and point to its benefits for accountability and local economy in addition to the benefits of community in and of itself. As I have demonstrated, practices are a rich and flexible mode for expressing and enacting beliefs and identity and can be helpful for others outside of Christianity. Indeed, the specific practices of community meals and participation in group events can be re-positioned to serve the goals and identity of activist communities. While participatory worship does not directly translate to non-religious communities, participatory events do, and activists have in the past used events such as concerts like Live Aid or informational fairs or round-table meetings as rhetorical tools. By finding appropriate ways for everyone to participate in an event, activists can develop practices that make their values and goals more a part of people's lives. Activists concerned with consumerism, in particular, should look to these sorts of community and service practices, as they directly combat its negative effects.

Beyond the concept of practice, other elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition might be relevant and useful as sources of invention for activists considering how to bring about cultural change. While the Christian church has had significant problems in the past (racism, the exclusion of women, heterosexism, the crusades...) it is also a belief community that has survived in a number of forms over 2000 years. The longevity and diversity of Christian communities suggests that there are things to learn about constructing communities and enacting beliefs, even if some of those things are learned from the mistakes of the past. Christian beliefs and practices continue to be meaningful to many people across the world, and perhaps critics would benefit from examining what makes Christianity so appealing to so many. Christians have also raised questions that

are relevant in broader contemporary culture. Such questions include: how much can a value or tradition adapt to a new culture without becoming something else? How can you go about living within a world or culture that is hopelessly imperfect and still strive to be virtuous? There are, of course, a spectrum of answers to these and other questions within the Christian tradition, but these debates are a useful starting place for secular debates about similar issues. Other Christian practices found in some traditions may also be helpful to those outside the church, such as Sabbath keeping, monastic simplicity or meditation.

In addition to being a long and rich history, some of the important concepts of Christianity are compatible with the ideals of activists. For example, the eschatological vision that drives Christian progressives is in many ways similar to the utopian vision that drives secular progressives. This becomes particularly clear in examples where the two meet, like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a Dream" speech. While King's dream reverberates with biblical images of the new earth, it also resonates with secular activists' vision of a better world. It is a point of intersection in a rhizome that brings to life ideas rooted in Christian scriptures within external (not rooted in Christianity) models grounded in values like equality and peace. As I discuss in chapter 3, the same vision of peace, justice and community seen in the Christian eschatological narratives is pre-figured and anticipated in the present in Christian communities by practices like participatory worship, community meals, and the sacraments. The ideal world imagined by the Christian eschatological narrative bears striking similarity to many secular utopian visions, and this shared idealism can be a useful place of meeting between Christian and non-Christian activists.

More broadly, specific values of activism and Christianity are sometimes shared or compatible. In this project I have focused specifically on the values of community, generosity and justice. These values are also at the core of many social change projects, including those looking for global economic justice, environmental justice, and an end to racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. Perhaps because of the mistakes made by the church in enacting these values, or perhaps because familiarity breeds contempt, the parts of the Christian tradition that coincide with contemporary activism are often overlooked. This is the case in other parts of culture as well. NPR commentator Caroline Langston makes this observation when discussing the character of the Virgin Mary: “Millions of people in this country practice yoga to acquire inner calm or look to Buddhism or Sufism for the tools of contemplation or join 12- step programs to admit they are powerless, but they should not lose sight of the fact that an image of peace and stillness is inherent in Christianity, too, in Mary, the mother of God, pregnant with life and wonder, who teaches us to be rapt observers before the incomprehensible mysteries of existence”(Langston, 2007). As Langston observes, and as this project demonstrates, often the Christian tradition contains resources for concepts, images and practices that may be helpful in the contemporary world.

The Christian tradition is not only a rich source for the creation of cultural and aesthetic expressions, but it also can be a useful frame for the propagation of not-specifically-Christian cultural expressions and activist goals; drawing on the language, images and practices of religion is a savvy strategy in a contemporary American culture in which 82 percent of all Americans identify as Protestant or Catholic Christians (*Baylor Religion Survey*, 2006), and the tradition of using religious language to describe the

American people goes back to the Puritans. Tapping into this long tradition is a good way to make new ideas accessible to the many familiar with the Christian tradition.

Suggestions for Future Research

In summary, this research presents important implications for rhetorical theory and criticism, Christianity and cultural activism. It also reveals the need for further research. Research, like practices, tends to function rhizomatically, and provide multiple entry points and points of connection. Here however, I offer several potential directions for future work. These suggestions include continued attention to the spiritual meanings of places and the rhetorical power of practices, in addition to continued mining of the Judeo-Christian tradition for alternative modes of thought and a continued critique of consumer spirituality.

My second chapter critiques one subset of consumer spirituality attitudes. As I mention in the introduction, consumer spirituality also includes other, related attitudes. For example, preachers of the prosperity gospel, like Bruce Wilkinson (2000) and Joel Osteen (2004), read the Bible in a way that suggests that wealth is an indication of blessing by God, and accessible to all Christians. Theologians and critics have already discussed the misleading and dangerous nature of these books, but their continued popularity suggests continued study and critique may also be necessary.

A related perspective that requires similar critique is Christianity as a branded identity. Just like any other social group identified by clothing, music and books, the astounding amount of stuff marketed to Christians implies faith, like style, can be achieved through purchase power. This is troublesome, first, for the same reasons that I brought up in chapter one: viewing religion as a thing to be bought removes much of its

power for personal or social change. This is also troubling for someone influenced by the tradition of Reformed Christianity. Reformed Christians emphasize the importance of engaging culture, rather than hiding from it. Constructing an exclusive subculture removes potential to engage with and enjoy aspects of mainstream culture. This, of course, reduces opportunities to influence and serve non-Christians through building relationships, a problem for many Christians who believe that evangelism is an important part of their call. Beyond these religious questions, though, this study also opens further questions for rhetorical criticism.

First, more critics should attend to the spiritual meanings of places. Sacred places play an important role in many religious traditions and are sometimes studied for their theological and historical significance. As I suggest here, religious spaces also have rhetorical significance that has a long-lasting impact on the ways that people understand their relationship to God, religion, and other practitioners. In addition, I believe that rhetorical scholars should be attentive to spiritual meanings and resonances that are present in other types of spaces. The historical tradition of sacred space is deeply intertwined with our understanding of memorial, community and response. Contemporary significant places, like memorials, museums and churches, recall the functions of those early monuments. Contemporary understandings of both religious space and civic space are influenced by this tradition, and that interaction should be taken seriously by critics.

Relatedly, I encourage other critics to continue to look to religious traditions for insights into alternative modes of rhetoric. While much of western culture is influenced by the worldviews and values of Christianity, its Hebrew roots are often overshadowed

by Greek influences. I suspect that examination of values from eastern religions and cultures might also benefit those looking for strategies to avoid consumerism, and forms of resistance to other cultural problems may be adaptable from these ancient traditions.

Finally, I encourage other critics to attend to the rhetorical power of practices. As de Certeau observes, practices of everyday life are an important part of how we understand ourselves as individuals and communities in relation to other people and communities and with our environments. Practices are often habits learned across generations and performed without thinking, and in that sense have a powerful rhetorical power of the status quo because of their role in defining people and communities. This power of iteration can often be an obstacle to progressive change. In this project, I demonstrated one way in which community practices can function rhizomatically for progressive change. Practices are an embodied mode of performing ideals and identities, and when progressive values are part of a community, those can be reflected and argued through practice. I suggest that other critics examine the ways practices function in various communities, and learn more about the power and limitations of practice as a rhetoric.

Final Thoughts

It is very difficult to define the orientation of Christianity toward consumerism. While some biblical texts express values clearly counter to those of consumer culture, an analysis of megachurches like North Point Community Church indicate that that relationship is more complex. However, any relationship with consumerism is difficult to define. We need to consume to survive – we must feed, dress, shelter and transport ourselves, and in our culture this must be done through the marketplace. Consumption is

not the problem, however. The problem comes when all aspects of life, including other people, experience, memory, education and spirituality is understood from the position of the consumer. While being a consumer is appropriate in some situations, consumerism suggests that it is appropriate in all situations. Finding the border between these two things is problematic, as is resistance. Because consumption is necessary and consumerism is pervasive, we cannot cure it or escape it. Instead, we can only resist, and forms of resistance are always partial, never complete. Given that, it is difficult to measure the success of resistance, except perhaps in the way that it sustains alternative modes of thinking and acting.

Despite (or perhaps because of) these difficulties, I feel it is important to examine and define the effects of consumerism within specific communities. While I focus on North Point church, because it was the most extreme example available to me, these same problems can be seen, in various forms, in many churches across the US and in other countries. I find this especially troubling because I believe that Christianity can and should be a force in the opposite direction, as I describe in chapter 3. Despite evidence to the contrary, I believe the Christian tradition and the biblical texts are rich resources for finding better ways to live together in our world. While human nature keeps us from achieving our full potential, I believe that attempting to construct better communities and ways of living lead to small moments of beauty that reveal what more there may be.

Consumer perspectives have the potential to keep us from experiencing some of the elements of Christianity that I believe are central – community, generosity, service, gratitude and participation. It is my hope that by drawing attention to the specific ways consumerism happens, and specific ways it might be resisted, I might contribute to a

better world by imagining a better Christian church, and better non-religious communities.

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