

“No Room in the Inn”  
Jodie Brown

*Introduction*

As I reflect on the coming Christmas season, I realize that everything I love about Christmas has more to do with the social traditions than religious ones. As a Christ follower, I have joined with those who feel a sense of guilt as each Christmas rolls around. I know that it should be more about Jesus, the implications of the incarnation, and the impact of his kingdom. But to be honest, I really don't know how to celebrate this holiday differently than I always have. I love the shopping, the lights, sounds and smells, the hustle and bustle of the season. But where does Jesus fit into all of this?

In this paper, I am going to discuss how the love of the Triune God transforms Christmas by breaking down the societal structures that equate love and fulfillment with the purchase and consumption of products. I will do this by pointing out the problems that come with a consumer based society, by showing that Jesus has no room in the Inn of our consumer structures and explaining how God's love transforms the Inn to allow us to give ourselves relationally.

*Consumer Madness*

The older I get, the more I realize that there is a madness that overcomes us during Christmas. We are bombarded with advertisements everywhere we turn, even Christian venues. Everything, it seems, is for sale. We are influenced by the market to 'shop until we drop' and we are up to our necks in debt. "The average American spends around \$800 on Christmas gifts. The credit card debt generated around the holidays is not paid off until the following July, and 25% of American consumers report that it takes them until October to finally pay off the Christmas debt."<sup>1</sup> This is madness!

We have become a nation of consumers. The problem is that our consumption doesn't just affect us. We have outsourced the production of most of what we consume to producing third world countries. "To attract investment, poor countries enter a spiraling race to

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Buckallew, "Don't Blame the Grinch" Oct. 17, 2004. <http://www.faulkingtruth.com/Articles/GlobalWarning/1014.html>

the bottom to see who can provide lower standards, reduced wages and cheaper resources. This has increased poverty and inequality for most people.”<sup>2</sup> Large corporations are exploiting the poor to make a profit from our greed. We can’t just blame the corporations that do this; as long as we demand the lowest price possible, they will continue to supply that low price. We participate in these structures without any concern for what it costs us, our families, or the poor who are exploited.

While this may cause many to stop and think, we are warned by economists that the welfare of our country ultimately rests upon our level of consumption during the Christmas season. “‘Black Friday’, the Friday after Thanksgiving, is so called because it is the traditional beginning of the Christmas shopping season and is supposedly the time when many businesses move from the red into the black, the entire profit margin for the year depending upon Christmas-related sales.”<sup>3</sup> So we are in a dilemma. If we stop our consumerist ways, we are in danger of sending this country into a recession that will affect our own bottom line. If we don’t stop our ways, we will continue to exploit the poor to satisfy the demands of our consumer appetites.

I think that the issue goes deeper still to the commodification of such things as love and fulfillment. I remember that my grandfather, a very loving and giving man, would take my sister, my cousin and I to the TG&Y department store, give us each a shopping cart and \$50.00, and send us off to spend it on whatever we wanted. We did this every year. While this may sound fine and good to most, I think that it represents how we have come to show love at Christmas time. We are more focused on the gift, as a representation of how much we are loved, than we are on the giver of the gift. Love has come to be demonstrated by the quality and/or quantity of gifts.<sup>4</sup>

Another facet of this issue is that we find fulfillment from buying and consuming products.<sup>5</sup> By my early teens, my family developed a tradition that came to be recognized and planned; each year we would make a trip to the city to go shopping together. This tradition, and

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<sup>2</sup> Anup Shah, “Causes of Poverty” Sept. 23, 2007. <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Poverty.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Bruce David Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 112.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 114-115.

<sup>5</sup> David Lambert, *Celebrating Christmas As If It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 25-26.

our annual trip to the department store with my grandfather, mixed a sense of love and family togetherness with the act of buying. This equation produces consumers who will seek out those experiences Christmas after Christmas. This kind of fulfillment comes easily in a consumer nation. These issues leave me wondering what place Jesus has in our current traditions of Christmas. It has left a lot of people wondering. There seems to be no room for Jesus at Christmas, which has spawned campaigns to “Put Christ back in Christmas.”<sup>6</sup> But do these campaigns work?

### *No Room in the Inn*

The history of Christmas in this country has been impacted by Christianity one way or another. When the Puritans and Presbyterians came to this country, they held an all out ban on Christmas, due to its association with Catholicism and its excess of immorality. By the middle 1800’s, Christians started to observe the holiday, but were not ready to give it the status of a holy day for Christians. With the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century came the turning of many religious minds to the spiritual significance of celebrating the birth of Christ at Christmas. Almost immediately, there were voices that spoke out against the commercialization and excesses of the holiday.<sup>7</sup> However, they were speaking out against the very aspects of the holiday that they helped to create. “The tradition of holiday purgation...bequeathed a model of thorough desacralization that actually helped Christmas go its secular way.”<sup>8</sup>

While Christians continued to warm up to the idea of a sacred holiday, the voices against the evils of it continued to grow. “Such sentiments finally coalesced in 1949 into a quite visible movement that went under the still-familiar banner, ‘Put Christ back in Christmas’.”<sup>9</sup> This movement grew over the next decade. But how successful was it? An atheist writer, Austin Cline, gives an all too true assessment. He says, “look at how successful they’ve been: the

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<sup>6</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 188.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 177-183.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 188.

buying season is not only longer, but more central both to Christmas and the economy.”<sup>10</sup> It seems that the movement has largely failed to impose the religious significance of Christmas onto the society as a whole. Why? Besides the fact that the former ban on Christmas actually helped it to develop into the commercial beast it is today, the efforts to change it have always been from within the structures fought.

In the 1950’s the “Put Christ back in Christmas” campaign was in full swing. In order to promote the message, “professional advertising men, copywriters and art directors, who loaned their skills unstintingly” were used. The message ultimately succumbed to the marketing strategies that were used to spread it. Marketing, according to George Barna, “encompasses all of the activities that lead up to an exchange of equally valued goods.” Those goods can be products, images or messages.<sup>11</sup> The message winds up being sold itself as a commodity, as we see in the form of T-shirts, Christmas ornaments and lighted signs, or the message is used to create a feeling or experience to sell merchandise. The author of *Consuming Religion*, Vincent J. Miller asserts that, “Advanced capitalism has shown itself to be strangely immune to ideological criticism. It seems capable of selling anything, including the values of its most committed opponents.”<sup>12</sup> Such was the case in the 1950’s where businesses began to display the “Put Christ back in Christmas” message along with nativity scenes. That message began to be used to sell merchandise. So the “Put Christ back in Christmas” campaign, with the commercialization of its message, participated in the very structures that it opposed.<sup>13</sup> Celebrating the birth of Christ, therefore, cannot be done from the vantage point of this participation.

If we want to make Jesus the “Reason for the Season”, it must be done from outside the consumer structures that control the way we live. Luke’s gospel tells us that Mary laid Jesus in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn. (NASB, Luke 2:7) Symbolically, there has never been any room for Jesus in the Inn (the world’s systems). Jesus, the King of the

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<sup>10</sup> Posted on About.com, Austin Cline, Putting Christ Back in Christmas: Is Jesus the Reason for the Season? <http://atheism.about.com/od/christmasholidayseason/p/JesusReason.htm>

<sup>11</sup> George Barna, *A Step-By-Step Guide to Church Marketing: Breaking Ground for the Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 189.

Jews, comes in weakness and dependency. This King does not conform to the political structures of the world. He does not play by Herod's rules. Jesus establishes his own kingdom. It is a subversive kingdom that brings upheaval to the world's systems. Jesus teaches another way to live.<sup>14</sup> We can't continue to participate in the oppressive structures of consumerism and give lip service to Jesus, nor can we "Put Christ back in Christmas" from within those same structures. There is no room for Jesus in that Inn.

### *From the Inn to the Manger*

Now that I am a father, I think about how I am teaching my daughter to know Jesus and follow him. Will she know his love from the way I love her? What will she learn from my actions that might be different from what I tell her about following Jesus? As my daughter turns three this December 12<sup>th</sup>, I want to know how I should celebrate Christmas with my family. As I have pointed out before, my Christmases have always been a participation in the joyous festival of consumption while sprinkling a little Jesus on top. To continue to celebrate Christmas in this way would only teach her that Jesus is just an afterthought to how we live. I don't want to pass that on to my daughter.

Since what drives us to consume, consume, consume is "our endless desire for self-expression, experience, and fulfillment," the problem comes down to our "autonomous self-determination" apart from God.<sup>15</sup> Autonomy is the opposite of relationship. Instead of finding our "self-expression, experience, and fulfillment" within the context of a loving relationship with God, we are finding those things as individual consumers. As I have said earlier, we cannot begin to address the excesses of Christmas from within the structures of our consumer culture. The only thing that truly breaks down those structures is the love of God in Jesus. We must move from the Inn to the manger. We must move from our participation in the consumer structures to experience the profound love of God manifested by the Incarnation. Only when we are consumed by His love will we find our "self expression, experience, and fulfillment" in Him.

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<sup>14</sup> Ideas taken from Rick McKinley's podcast sermon: Advent '06, <http://www.adventconspiracy.org/resources/>

<sup>15</sup> Craig Gay, "Sensualists without Heart: Contemporary Consumerism in Light of the Modern Project," in Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 17.

Then we can say with the Apostle Paul, “But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” (Philippians 3:7, NASB)

It never fails that the challenge to stop our consumerist ways labels the challenger as a ‘Scrooge’. Perhaps, our concern over what we won’t get for Christmas shows how deeply we’re entrenched in its madness! Our “autonomous self-determination” leads us to give and receive from false notions of love, but the love of God leads us to give and receive in his pattern. Speaking of the effects of God’s love in our hearts, Paul Louis Metzger says, “...the unilateral relationship between the vertical and horizontal dimensions implies that a converted heart will manifest itself in concern for the neighbor (1 John 4:7-21).”<sup>16</sup> This transformed heart motivates us to give to others as God has given to us.

Giving and receiving are part of Christmas. The problem is that we tend to give autonomously from God and others. Our lives are whirlwinds that leave little room for Jesus or others and so, by our giving of commodities, we try to demonstrate our love, which is often lacking due to our absence. Our focus is wrongly on the gift, as an expression of love, rather than on the giver. God, on the other hand, gives himself relationally to us through the Incarnation of the Son. (Isaiah 9:6) As I am consumed by the love of God, I, in turn, am free to love others and give myself to them relationally. This is what giving is all about. To love is to give, not products, but ourselves. God is our example. (Romans 5:8)

Moving from the Inn to the manger starts within my own heart. God gives me his love so that I can truly love others. (Romans 5:5) And his love has moved me to start some new traditions with my own family. Instead of traditions of shopping for that right gift that says ‘I love you’, I can say it while I spend time with my family. We can make gifts for each other instead of going into debt. We can worship together and reflect on God’s unfailing love and the gift of his son. When we aren’t bogged down in the hustle and bustle of holiday consumerism we will have much more time, energy, and resources to give ourselves to our family and others in need.

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<sup>16</sup>Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 92.

## *Conclusion*

I started this paper discussing the ills of Christmas celebrated in a consumer culture. The problems of this culture run deep to the very essence of love, the expression of love, and our source of fulfillment. Many have tried to bring about change in various ways but have often wound up condoning the very evils they opposed. But, as I have found, change comes from God who transforms our hearts to love and give as he does. He consumes us with his love so that we can celebrate Jesus' birth free from over-consumption and greed. In this way there is room for Jesus at Christmas.

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