

Practical Christian Living

Advance in Faith Unit 104

Week 6: Christian Living in Contemporary Culture



Introduction

The Purpose of this session is:

- *To enable believers to identify the essential characteristics of a Consumer-orientated, Media-driven, Image-based, Socially-networked, Instant-gratification Society;*
- *To encourage Believers to critically assess contemporary cultural norms against the values and principles of scripture and respond to the pressures of modern day cultural norms with biblical wisdom and discernment.*

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age...

1. Consumer-Orientated / Instant-Gratification Society

"In a few hundred years, when the history of our time will be written from a long term perspective, I think it is very probable that the most important event these historians will see is not technology, it is not the Internet, it is not e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time (and I mean that literally-for the first time), substantial and rapidly growing numbers of people have choices. For the first time, they will have to manage themselves. And let me say, we are totally unprepared for it." ¹

A consumer-orientated society revolves around the purchasing of goods and services, many (if not most) of which are not really essential. It is at its heart a materialist and a hedonist (pleasure-loving) society, which appears to believe that the most important things in life are material possessions and/or purchased pleasures and whose trend-setters are those who have a lot and/or spend a lot. A consumer-orientated society is also an instant gratification society: Not only do I *want it* (consumerism), but I want it *now!* (instant gratification). Contemporary consumer society is a product of the Industrial Revolution of the 1700-1800's, where the basically agrarian (farming) societies of Europe and North America became city-and-factory dominated societies. The invention of manufacturing machines and production lines led to a profusion of goods that people could buy. As more of the world was explored, more resources became available to feed these factories with raw material. At the same time the increase

¹ Peter Drucker in *Harvard Business Review* article: "Managing Oneself", Oct. 2007

in human life spans and in basic education for larger parts of national populations led to a more prosperous society. The combinations of plenty of manufactured goods, an educated, prosperous and healthy society and increased leisure time produced the consumer-orientated society in which we live today.

What are the characteristics of a consumer-orientated society?

- This consumer society maintains a market-driven economy in which there is artificially created demand for consumer items - advertising declares: “you owe it to yourself”. The average person is then pressured to buy things they really don’t need.
- A “hopping-and-shopping” mentality is evident among citizens of a consumer-orientated society. Life becomes a long procession of visiting marketing centres for the latest products. This is evident when a new shopping mall opens or a new chain-store or fast-food outlet arrives in the country. “Everyone is going there...!” With it comes the “shop-’til-you-drop” mentality.
- People who buy into the values of this sort of society often become obsessed with “keeping up with the Jones’”. A competitive lifestyle must be followed at any cost, no matter what. In this sort of culture, one’s self-worth can easily become attached to / determined by your car, your house, your clothes or some other consumer-durable.
- Consumers are also pressured into being “in” and “with it” - never out of step with the latest fashions. Peer pressure is manipulated by marketers very successfully: no-one wants to be caught wearing fashions, driving cars, taking holidays, followings hobbies (the list is endless!!) that are not “in”. Unfortunately, what was “in” yesterday may well be “out” today!
- This society usually perpetuates a lifestyle / culture of debt - acquire now, pay later. This policy is not just followed for essential and very costly items (property and transport) but also for non-essentials which prevailing fashion assures us we cannot live without - after all, everyone else has one... and you owe it to yourself.

What are the characteristics of an instant gratification society?

“I want it, and I want it *now!*” This society is a society that struggles to wait, that cannot concentrate for any significant length of time and that has not learned how to endure. It is essentially an impatient society and one marked by the following characteristics:

- The marketing of quick or instant items, remedies or achievements. No longer do you need to wait a long time for the coffee to brew, for the food to cook or for your savings to accumulate. You need not work for years on that achievement such as degree - this society says you can “have it now!” In terms of consumer society, the slogan is: “Live now, pay later!

- There is a high demand for immediate results or sensations. Video and cyber (computer) culture have added to this demand - why listen to a story or read a book, when you can experience it all in graphic video on your TV or computer screen... right now?
- In this society there are increasingly short attention spans and online information is consumed in increasingly shorter sound bites.
- There is often an inability to work hard for an achievement or to endure a difficult situation. This is made evident by haste with which many people enter and exit marriage, employment, college and university, etc. This is often a “drop-out” society in which there are many who rarely have the patience or endurance to complete what they have started.
- An instant gratification society does not engender the ability to adopt a structured and disciplined approach to any enterprise including life itself.

It is obvious that such a society is governed by superficial goals and values and church leaders need to take care that they do not offer Christianity (services, songs, sermons, etc.) as just one more consumer item without confronting the desperate spiritual weaknesses inherent in doing so.

Living by the Bible in a consumer and instant gratification society

Just about every type of Biblical literature has something to say about the sort of values we have just described. Depending upon the situation under discussion, one might find a story (what we call a narrative), a psalm, a prophecy, a proverb, a parable, a teaching of Jesus or a teaching from an apostle that rejects these values and sponsors alternative, godly values like generosity, contentment, diligence, hard work, simplicity, appreciation and self-control.

Although the Bible does not condemn material prosperity - indeed, in the Old Testament it is a mark of divine blessing - it contains an overwhelming number of cautions in this regard. The ultimate evaluation is contained in:

1 Timothy 6:9-10

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.

The Bible calls us to an opposite attitude to ‘I want it now!’

The Bible stresses precisely the opposite attitude: *application and discipline* (hard work) are the keys to attaining satisfying achievements. Patience, persistence and self-control are essential. This means resisting distractions. The Bible advocates very different values and priorities to the ones offered by the dominant culture of our society:

- Consider Job's evaluation of his life after losing everything – **Job 1:21**
- **Prov. 6:6-11** - Tells us about the ant, the sluggard and poverty. It commends hard work and diligence and cautions against idleness.
- The man with the one talent was reproved for not a lack of initiative and for applying himself - **Matthew 25:14-30**.
- Paul tells Timothy that being a Christian means living a soldier's life - a life of commitment and discipline - **2 Timothy 2:3-6**
- Notice Jesus' commendation of the hard work and commitment of the Ephesian church - **Revelation 2:2-3**
- Paul expresses his contentment with his material state in **Philippians 4:11-13** - *"I have learned to be content whether I have riches or whether I have poverty"*. One of the primary characteristics of the consumer society is continual discontent.

2. Image-based / Socially-Networked Society

The Role of Technology

The rapid development of technology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has radically changed the way people live. From the mass production mechanisms of the Industrial Revolution to the more recent development of mobile web technology (smart devices) and social media, technology has rapidly and profoundly redefined how we work, play and communicate.

We have migrated from a world dominated by words to one dominated by images where information comes to us in real time and cyber interactions on any given day often outnumber face to face contacts. Mobile web technology has also made accessibility to online goods and services easier and cheaper than ever before while at the same time, social media has provided each of us with a window into one another's lives.

Together they have created an almost endless cycle of consumption and comparison that drives the new economy and draws more and more people into an ever-expanding alternative cyber universe.

A Christian, living in this context, should consider the importance of:

- 'Incarnational' living (physical presence and face-to-face interaction);
- Discerning and differentiating between 'reality' and 'image' (E.G. cyber-self vs actual self);
- The challenge of Work-Life Integration and the need for self-leadership / management.

Conclusion

A Biblical approach to life will evaluate contemporary society critically and avoid the snare of acquiescence to the values and priorities of the day, if indeed they are inconsistent with the values and priorities of the Kingdom of God.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you ever feel pressured to be something / own something / do something by the forces of our consumer-based culture? If so, how can you counter-act these pressures and what alternatives can you embrace?
2. In what ways ought Christ-followers to be 'different' from non-believers?
3. In Romans 12:1-2 Paul encourages us to ensure that we are not "conformed to the patterns (values, principles, etc.) of this world". What practical steps can a Christian take to prevent this kind of conformity?

Memory Verse:

Titus 2:11-14

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