



# Has Advent Succumbed to Consumerism? Reflections on an Embattled Season

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**H**as Advent succumbed to the forces of consumerism, or is it at least slowly crumbling?<sup>1</sup> Advent's erosion seems particularly advanced here in North America. In the United States, Christmas shopping begins on November 1 instead of the Friday following Thanksgiving, as it did only twenty-five years ago. Advertising on radio, television, in newspapers, and on the internet has ramped up over the past several years in order to capitalize on the anxieties of those set on finding the "perfect gift" to share at Christmas. Senses are bombarded by ads encouraging frenzied excursions for early morning trips to shopping malls and late-night runs to electronics warehouses for the greatest bargain on the current fad in order to satisfy fleeting longings. It is a curious time of year when priorities shift and hedonism rises.

<sup>1</sup>The definition of "consumerism" used here is this: "The equating of personal happiness with purchasing material possessions and consumption." See "Consumerism" in *Wikipedia* at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism> (accessed 6 August 2007). See also, Benjamin Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

*Preparation for Christmas in North American culture has become dominated by the forces of consumerism. Is there another way? People of faith can be renewed by concentrating on the traditional themes of Advent exemplified in the biblical texts for this season.*

Benjamin Barber mused recently:

When we see politics permeate every sector of life, we call it totalitarianism. When religion rules all, we call it theocracy. But when commerce dominates everything, we call it liberty. Can we redirect capitalism to its proper end: the satisfaction of real human needs? Well, why not? The world teems with elemental wants and is peopled by billions who are needy. They do not need iPods, but they do need potable water, not colas, but inexpensive medicines, not MTV, but their ABC's.<sup>2</sup>

I suspect many people of faith would concur with some of these claims. However, as for the season prior to Christmas, I think we might hear a different response in North America. Although the liturgical heartbeat of the Christian calendar thumps a christocentric message of grace, other tones are pounded by cultural whims and consumerist values. One may wonder if there is any place left at all for a season called Advent. With the exception of wreathes, poinsettias, and candles, Advent seems to have been so transformed by cultural norms that it has become merely a quaint reminder of the bygone spirituality of a former era.

Has Advent lost its moorings? Is there any hope of renewed interest in this season with its thousand-year history? Are the readings of the Advent season outdated or inappropriate for a culture that has been trying to replace them by a steady emphasis on various versions of a "prosperity" gospel?

Despite all, there are some who think Advent still has a place in the cycle of the Christian liturgical year. For them it can still serve to kindle faith fires of allegiance to a living Christ, remind people of an eternal grace, and prompt hopeful thoughts about a future day of the Lord.

#### ADVENT BEGINS THE CHRISTIAN LITURGICAL YEAR

Advent follows on the heels of Christ the King Sunday in the liturgical year. People of faith who follow a liturgical cycle of readings have barely had time to consider the christological implications of divine rule before they are forced to consider a coming judge, the gravity of human sin, broken shards of human existence, and the wonder of God's grace. It is a jarring movement from the end of one Christian year into the beginning of the next.

The biblical readings for Advent in the Revised Common Lectionary form a foundation on which the message of the incarnation might rest. Over these four Sundays, images of what God has done and what God promises to do commingle in expectation and hope. Each week people of faith are reminded about past actions of God, encouraged to reflect on what the texts suggest for a life of faith, are presented with implications for the person and work of Christ, and are prompted to ruminate on theological questions and considerations of a future day when all will be set right with creation. The season of Advent carries the faithful along in a

<sup>2</sup>Benjamin R. Barber, "Overselling Capitalism: Why today's markets are headed for disaster unless there is a shift in focus," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 April 2007. At <http://www.benjaminbarber.com> (accessed 30 April 2007).

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The Christian calendar is derived from the Jewish cycle of religious observances; in its present form, its roots are planted in the beginning of the fourth century through various edicts of Constantine and the efforts of local bishops, including Cyril of Jerusalem who began the celebration of a Christ Mass (later called Christmas) in the middle of the fourth century. In 354, Pope Liberius set December 25 as the date for the celebration of Christmas. Prior to this, Easter and Pentecost marked the two poles of the Christian liturgical year.

Advent was not formalized until the Middle Ages and was initially observed as a season of fasting in advance of the celebration of Christ’s birth. It was somewhat similar to the season of Lent and was observed over a four- to six-week period prior to Christmas. The Protestant Reformers were split regarding observance of the liturgical seasons—including Advent. Martin Luther favored observance of a liturgical calendar and preached sermons for the various seasons, including Advent, while John Calvin found it problematic to observe the liturgical calendar on two counts. First, he found its inclusion of days commemorating the saints to be a challenge to christology. Second, he saw the popular practices associated with the various Christian festivals latticed with irreligious superstition.<sup>3</sup> If Calvin and Luther were living today, one might guess that both would find fault with the consumerist impulse moving through North American congregations, and challenge it head-on.

It has only been in the past two hundred years or so that the liturgical season of Advent has been more widely practiced among Protestant denominations. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Orthodox Christians have practiced it for centuries, with different emphases depending on the period and cultural context in which it was observed. In the past fifty years or so, most Christian denominations that observe Advent have begun to shift the emphasis away from a penitential season toward focus on themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. The Orthodox Church continues to practice a season of fasting prior to the celebration of Christ’s birth and seeks to be in concord with historic expressions of faith for the season. Coptic Orthodox Christians mark Advent by abstaining from meat as an act of spiritual formation and solidarity with the poor.

<sup>3</sup>L. W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer, *The Christian Calendar: A Complete Guide to the Seasons of the Christian Year Telling the Story of Christ and the Saints from Advent to Pentecost* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1974) 11.

In the United States, Advent is observed in various ways. Contemporary Protestants have largely relegated the season to one of expectation and hope. Traces of the historic themes of eschatology and repentance may still be seen; however, much of the focus for Advent seems to be on the Advent wreath, liturgies associated with the wreath, and discussions about the proper Sunday for the lighting of the pink Advent candle. The accoutrements of Advent vary and are continually in flux as North Americans endeavor to shape the season to fit specific liturgical, religious, and cultural needs and whims.<sup>4</sup>

### OF WHAT VALUE IS IT?

Advent is positioned at a time of the year when darkness settles over the North American continent and sunlight is a longed-for commodity. Perhaps, then, it is not accidental that people are bombarded by blinding collages of color, and diamonds and gold are paraded as potential answers for unrequited love. North American Christians might find the season to be something of a spiritual battleground where values are tested, contested, and reevaluated in light of competing pressures.

In 1999 and 2000 I was fortunate to live and work at Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji. While there I noted an absence of the common refrain of consumerism in the weeks prior to Christmas. It was a reprieve from the typical North American assault and suggested a different rhythm for the season that could serve as a healthy alternative. It reminded me of the season's potential to stimulate spiritual growth and expand reflection about the meaning of incarnation in more substantial ways than I have ordinarily experienced in the West.

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As the season opens on the fourth Sunday preceding Christmas, one has already been inundated by ads promising satisfaction through things. A life of faith is generally not the issue. Fasting is eschewed in favor of gluttony. People are directed to engage in a buying binge and nudged away from the four dominant themes of the Advent season. Nearly everyone knows in the deep recesses of their spirits that none of this will bring true satisfaction, and we may well wonder whether it is really worth it to try to salvage a meaningful Advent.

This is not a new concern. Martin Luther's 1522 sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent echoes the same theme. In reflecting on his own contemporary context Luther wrote:

<sup>4</sup>For a brief history of Advent see *New Advent*, an online Catholic encyclopedia, at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01165a.htm> (accessed 30 April 2007).

There has never been such building and planting in the world. There has never been such gluttonous and varied eating and drinking as now. Wearing apparel has reached its limit in costliness. Who has ever heard of such commerce as now encircles the earth?...[E]very one must see and say either ruin or a change must come. It is hard to see how a change can come. Day after day dawns and the same conditions remain.<sup>5</sup>

The strain and pull of consumerism isn't new, but it has increased. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Christmas season sales in 2005 amounted to 31.7 billion dollars.<sup>6</sup> What would happen if Christians made a conscious decision to use half of the money they usually spend for Christmas on mission projects and the other half on their usual gifts? Certainly, retailers would find this approach problematic, as would big business and manufacturing firms, but the poor might have some of their needs met. I am, no doubt, a bit too optimistic about this possibility; yet, it is a matter of the will to fight against the swift current of the consumerist impulse. Without a strategy to confront it, we will find ourselves swept up by it.

#### THE THEMES OF ADVENT

The strategy we need is neither new nor complex, though it might be revolutionary: preach the biblical texts. Four themes dominate the readings for the season of Advent. The first concerns the second coming of Christ and the final judgment. The second emphasizes preparation in the wilderness through repentance and announces the person and work of Christ. The third picks up where the second left off and sharply emphasizes the acts of God through the Spirit; and the final Sunday marks the responses of Joseph and Mary to God's grace as exemplars of faithfulness.

##### *Advent 1*

The Christian year commences with images of final judgment at the second coming of Christ. Sheep and goats will be separated. People will be sorted. It is not a popular image for a death-denying culture that bucks at the notion of God as judge. Yet, as a recent commentary maintains:

Contrary to the manner in which it is often celebrated in the churches, Advent begins not on a note of joy, but of despair. Humankind has reached the end of its rope. All our schemes for self-improvement, for extricating ourselves from the traps we have set for ourselves, have come to nothing. We have now realized at the deepest level of our being that we cannot save ourselves and that, apart from the intervention of God, we are totally and irretrievably lost.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Martin Luther, "Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent (Luke 21:25–36)," in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 62–63.

<sup>6</sup>U.S. Census Bureau *News*, at <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2006/cb06ff-19.pdf> (accessed 6 August 2007).

<sup>7</sup>Walter Brueggemann et al., *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year B* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 1.

Broken people need not be reminded of their brokenness. They live it. Yet, a word of hope can crack the concrete that covers human spirits, allowing the waters of grace to seep in. Those who long for justice shall be satisfied. Those who cry for mercy shall be sated. And those who ask, “How long?” are provided with an answer that is rooted in hope.

In several of the readings, the first Sunday of Advent challenges people of faith to reflect on their own understanding of the person and work of Christ. Questions of eschatology and incarnation are thrust to the forefront in order to cause reflection about the grace of God in the face of a future judgment.

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#### *Advent 2*

Advent 2 focuses on repentance and preparation. Here we encounter the grizzled countenance of Jesus’ cousin John as he calls people away from lives of comfort and sin into the Judean wilderness for repentance and reorganizing of life priorities. John exemplifies and embodies those who strive for truth and want to know for certain that Jesus is the Messiah. Here the call is not only for repentance in order to be ready for the encounter with God the Son, but also for awareness of the unique place his ministry takes in the world. The season of Advent is squarely focused on the person and work of Christ.

#### *Advent 3*

In the Roman Catholic tradition the third Sunday in Advent has been called “Gaudete Sunday” (*gaudete* = rejoice). “It became the custom to exchange the purple vestments and altar hangings for rose-colored ones to mark the special rejoicings of the day.”<sup>8</sup> For some, this has been understood to mean that the Advent fast is getting closer to completion—purple gives way to pink. For Lutherans the color traditionally remained purple in memory of the sufferings of Christ as well as his royal status, though now the blue of hope has usually supplanted purple altogether.

Most important, this Sunday proclaims Jesus as the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. It denotes a decrease of John’s ministry and looks forward to the work of Christ, bringing gladness into the hearts of the faithful over what God is doing in their midst.

#### *Advent 4*

The fourth Sunday of Advent concentrates on the parents of the child who will be born in Bethlehem. Depending on the liturgical year, Joseph or Mary serves as an example of faithfulness that seeks God’s will above one’s own. They become types for the faithful to emulate.

<sup>8</sup>Cowie and Gummer, *The Christian Calendar*, 18.

Expectation, hope, and joy are woven together in Mary's experience: "The joy that bursts forth in Mary's heart is not centered on the fact that she has been favored above all other women...but on her realization that human life will now never be the same. That which is high will be brought low, while those who cannot lift themselves up will be elevated to new hopes by the power of God."<sup>9</sup> The fourth Sunday in Advent serves as the overture that welcomes the incarnation.

The drums of consumerism are deafening during the months of November and December in the Western world. The season prior to Christmas seems to have been swallowed by the glitz and glamour of popular cultural icons. Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman, Rudolph, and the panoply of seasonal gods and goddesses have in many homes taken ascendancy over the four themes that have marked this season for Christians over the past ten centuries. Even in the church the focus has shifted.

The question remains: Has Advent succumbed to consumerism? Maybe it has in great measure on the North American continent. However, for people of faith a renewed emphasis on Advent can still provide an antidote to the malady of consumerism that robs people of a joy that is theirs already in Christ Jesus. ☩

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.