



# A Car Is Not Just a Car: Cultural and Spiritual Implications of the American Automobile

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**F**or many of us the automobile seems to be simply a tool, a necessity that transports us to work, school, stores, and entertainment. In addition, it often becomes a vehicle (pun intended) of self-expression, communicating style or prestige, and perhaps serving as a toy for fun. For car buffs, it is even more: a hobby or a passion.

Yet the automobile is far more significant than those preliminary impressions, because it has reshaped virtually our entire cultural context, with implications for our economy, our lifestyles, our values, our yearnings. To reflect upon the “ripple effects” of the automobile, think about the features of American culture listed below, some of which evoke fond memories and most of which surround us even today. One could make the case that none of the following examples would exist, at least in their current forms, without the influence of the automobile:

Paved roads  
Billboards and other roadside advertising  
Gas stations and garages  
Home garages

*The automobile is a tool and more. It has reshaped virtually our entire cultural context, with implications for our economy, our lifestyles, and our values. The spiritual implications of a cultural reality so significant invite careful consideration by Christians.*

Auto parts stores  
Drive-in theaters, churches, and restaurants (with carhops)  
Drive-through windows for fast food  
Motels, previously known as auto camps or tourist cabins  
Expanded tourism  
RVs  
Sunday afternoon drives  
Lover's lane, and backseat romances  
Suburbs, urban sprawl  
Rush hour  
Antique auto restoration and collectibles  
Model cars and toy cars  
Car racing (including NASCAR)  
Factory assembly lines  
Growth of the petroleum industry  
American dependence upon fossil fuels  
Air pollution from vehicle emissions  
And much more

We often take everyday aspects of our lives for granted, without much time for reflection upon their wider implications. The automobile is one example, a daily part of our routines, requiring little thought unless gas prices rise or the car breaks down or we need to buy a newer one. Yet it is possible to claim that no other technological feature of modern culture has exerted more wide-ranging influence on people's lives than the automobile. Two other rivals for that claim would be the television and the computer, and a debate about which has been more influential would be a fascinating discussion. Interestingly, when a family minivan incorporates a DVD player and computer automated systems, the three merge.

The automobile deserves more thoughtful reflection than most of us have given it. How did the automobile develop, and what are its wider implications? In what ways has it reshaped our culture, influenced our lives, and impacted the environment? What benefits and appeals have led to its popular adoption in the United States and around the world? Do Christian perspectives relate to this topic in any way, and if so, what insights and responses do Christians have to offer?

#### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AUTOMOBILE**

When the automobile began depends upon how you define it. As far back as the late middle ages, thinkers like Roger Bacon and Leonardo da Vinci imagined self-propelled road vehicles. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most early attempts to replace horse-drawn carriages (or wagons pulled by other animals) were steam-powered experiments, but they were too heavy and awkward to meet much success.

The modern automobile required a combination of three things: "a light,

sprung, wheeled vehicle; a compact, efficient power unit; and hard-surfaced roads.”<sup>1</sup> As a key predecessor of the car, bicycles encouraged progress on two of the three. In the words of James J. Flink, an historian of the automobile, “No preceding technological innovation—not even the internal combustion engine—was as important to the development of the automobile as the bicycle.”<sup>2</sup> The bicycle was introduced in Paris in the 1860s and quickly spread throughout Europe and to the United States. Its popularity encouraged the development of hard-surface roads, and bicycle production involved technological innovations in steel-tube framing, ball bearings, chain drive, differential gearing, pneumatic tires, and a variety of manufacturing techniques. In addition, the bicycle whet the public’s appetite for individual mobility, adding new possibilities for individual transportation beyond reliance on a horse. Significantly, many early automobile manufacturers were first bicycle manufacturers, with recognizable names like Opel, Peugeot, Rover, and Rambler.

With the bicycle encouraging development of two necessary prerequisites for the development of the automobile (roads and light vehicles), three competing options emerged to fill the final prerequisite (a compact power unit). One option was a revised steam engine, lighter and more efficient than the cumbersome predecessors. For example, Peugeot’s first attempt at a car, in 1889, was a heavy tricycle powered by a steam engine. Among several examples in the United States, the name with the most lingering fame was the Stanley Steamer. No matter how efficient the steam engine became, one disadvantage was the weight of large quantities of water the vehicle had to carry. In addition, some sort of electric or gasoline engine was required to heat the water into steam, and as developments proceeded, steam automobiles consumed as much gasoline as did the cars powered solely by an internal combustion engine. In that case, one might as well choose the gasoline engine and dispense with the water.

In addition to the steam engine, a second option was an electric car, and a third was the internal combustion engine, the eventual winner. Steam-, electric-, and gasoline-powered automobiles all were produced in France, Germany, England, and the United States for several decades around the turn of the century, but the competition declined between 1910 and 1920 when the gasoline internal combustion engine became dominant. In retrospect, some voices now regret the choice, but at the time the electric car had several disadvantages, mainly involving the limitations of storage batteries. One could drive only a limited number of miles before the battery needed recharging, and in the United States recharging stations tended to be confined to urban areas. Batteries deteriorated rapidly, and they weighed more than the gasoline carried for internal combustion engines. In addition, electric cars were substantially more expensive both to manufacture and to operate. The famous Spindletop oil gusher in Beaumont,

<sup>1</sup>James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) 1.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

Texas, occurred on January 10, 1901, producing more oil than the combined output of all other wells in the United States at that time, an event some persons call the birth of the modern oil industry. Thereafter gasoline became a cheap commodity, easily available in both rural and urban areas throughout the United States, providing a strong competitive advantage for gasoline engines against the electric alternative.

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In the late 1800s, early automobiles were entrepreneurial ventures, produced by hundreds of small companies in Europe and the United States, as a curiosity for inventors and for the rich. In the United States that situation changed with the introduction of production-line manufacturing by Ransom Olds in 1902, constructing Oldsmobiles that were more affordable than previous cars. Henry Ford greatly expanded the concept of assembly-line car production; he “combined precision manufacturing, standardized and interchangeable parts, a division of labor, and, in 1913, a continuous moving assembly line.”<sup>3</sup> Ford also pioneered “vertical integration” in a massive industrial complex near Dearborn, Michigan, by bringing together all stages of production from refining raw materials to the manufacture of component parts to the final assembly of vehicles. While other inventors and companies also played roles in these developments, Henry Ford and his company were key influences in the rise of mass production, which some observers nicknamed “Fordism.” The resources and technologies required for the scale of mass production dramatically reduced the number of American car companies, from 253 in 1908 to 108 in 1920, and down to 44 in 1929.<sup>4</sup>

In 1908 Ford introduced the Model T as a reasonably priced, efficient automobile, and by 1918 half of all cars in the United States were Model Ts. By 1927, when it was withdrawn from production, more than fifteen million had been sold. As other companies adopted similar manufacturing techniques and pricing, the horseless carriage became a vehicle for the masses. In 1900, Colonel Albert A. Pope, a bicycle manufacturer, claimed that “inside of ten years there will be more automobiles in use in the large cities of the United States than there are now horses in these cities.”<sup>5</sup> His prediction of the rapid adoption of the automobile by the general population certainly came true, extending beyond one decade and beyond the cities into all parts of the nation.

The rest, as they say, is history. Statistics compiled from the 2000 U.S. Census

<sup>3</sup>Website of the Henry Ford museum, <http://www.hfmgv.org/exhibits/hf/printdefault.asp> (accessed 10 May 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Flink, *Automobile Age*, 70.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted by Flink, *Automobile Age*, 27.

reported more than 211 million registered vehicles in the United States in 1998, including almost 132 million automobiles. The market saturation of the automobile in the United States is so pervasive that the focus has turned to measuring households with more than one car. In 1960, twenty percent of American households had two cars; in 1996, sixty percent of households had two or more. Since 1970, the number of vehicle miles traveled in the United States has increased 149 percent, while the U.S. population has increased 39 percent.<sup>6</sup>

A poll conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology asked one thousand Americans to name the one invention that they could not live without, and sixty-three percent replied, the automobile. (Other responses further down the list included the lightbulb, the telephone, the television, aspirin, the microwave oven, the blow-dryer, and the computer.)<sup>7</sup> What are the reasons that the American public, as well as other cultures around the world, have embraced this invention so fully and enthusiastically? Some obvious suggestions would include the mobility, independence, and convenience of on-demand transportation, with more capability of distance than the horse or bicycle and more allowance for individual choice than mass transit. The possibilities of style and prestige, plus entertainment and sport, only enhance the benefits.

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An influential theory about American history connects in significant ways with this reflection on the appeal of the automobile. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner, then a young historian from the University of Wisconsin, presented an academic paper on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” It became known as the Turner Thesis and became one of the most influential and hotly debated theories in the study of American history. Turner claimed that what made United States culture and civilization unique, distinct from its European antecedents, was the formative influence of the frontier experience. He wrote that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”<sup>8</sup> Turner argued that, among other results, the frontier helped shape Americans into rugged indi-

<sup>6</sup>Online at [http://www.allcountries.org/uscensus/1027\\_motor\\_vehicle\\_registrations.html](http://www.allcountries.org/uscensus/1027_motor_vehicle_registrations.html) (accessed 16 May 2008); see Brad Edmundson, “Who needs two cars?” *American Demographics* (December 1996); Ron Sider and Jim Ball, “What Would Jesus Drive?” Discussion Paper, online at <http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org/resources/paper/> (accessed 12 May 2008).

<sup>7</sup>Dean D. Dauphinais and Peter M. Gareffa, *Car Crazy* (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996) 3.

<sup>8</sup>Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, ed. Harold P. Simonson (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1963) 27.

vidualists, self-reliant in order to survive, jealously guarding their freedom against any institutional controls that might be imposed upon them. Portions of his essay also raised the theme of mobility, referring to the “restless, nervous energy” of Americans as they moved westward; so much space available on the frontier allowed the discontented to escape to isolation or to new adventures. “Movement has been [America’s] dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise.”<sup>9</sup>

Frederick Jackson Turner noted that a bulletin from the Superintendent of the 1890 United States Census observed that population density had become widespread enough in the United States that it was no longer meaningful to speak of a line of frontier settlement. Turner used this official statement to declare, in essence, that as of 1890 the frontier era of American history was over. Moving beyond Turner, it is striking now, looking back, to see that the American automobile developed precisely in the two decades immediately following the supposed closing of the frontier. Several historians have noted the continuity with frontier values, as the automobile became the new mode of expression in a society that highly valued both individualism and mobility. Carrying frontier values, Americans drove off in their automobiles into new kinds of frontiers.

#### WIDER CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

On the relationship between Christianity and automobiles, consider the flurry of publicity in 2002 surrounding a campaign that asked “What Would Jesus Drive?”—targeted especially against SUVs. The slogan seemed humorous, and critics wondered if Jesus really cared much about automotive purchases. Yet underneath the superficial news coverage was a serious campaign that raised significant issues.

The educational effort was organized by the Evangelical Environmental Network, “a biblically orthodox Christian environmental organization” that had been formed in 1994 to demonstrate that some conservative Christians shared the environmental concerns of other Americans. They developed a website and published a magazine called *Creation Care*. In 2002, the EEN developed a campaign playing upon the well-known slogan “What would Jesus do?” (WWJD), with two main purposes: to “understand that our transportation choices are moral choices that for Christians fall under the Lordship of Christ” and to “take appropriate actions to address the problems associated with our transportation choices.” The EEN formed a partnership with the National Council of Churches and some Jewish leaders, and they formally launched their educational initiative with a November 2002 press conference in Detroit. Over 4,000 media stories followed in the next six months, on radio and television and in newspapers and magazines, including virtually all major media outlets. Campaign materials acknowledged that “the first re-

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 57.

action by some to the question ‘What Would Jesus Drive?’ is to laugh. However, we consider it one of the crucial questions of our day.” The question, “while initially amusing, actually calls Christians to ‘get serious’ about considering their transportation choices as moral ones.”<sup>10</sup>

The website for the campaign ([www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org](http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org)) contains bumper stickers, pledge forms, fact sheets, a discussion paper, copies of news coverage, and other resources. The Discussion Paper, intended for use by churches and educational institutions, is coauthored by Jim Ball, the executive director of EEN, and Ron Sider, the well-known president of Evangelicals for Social Action. It is a helpful document because it highlights the major concern that many Christians have about automobiles today and their environmental impact, yet it also broadens the discussion to other issues that are less often raised by Christians. Whether one agrees with EEN perspectives or not, their discussion provides an outline of some of the wider cultural issues raised by the automobile, issues appropriate for Christian ethical discussion.

The most current and obvious issue is the relationship of automobiles to global warming, given all of the publicity and debate on this subject in the past few years. The EEN discussion paper cites UN documents claiming that U.S. transportation energy use accounted for more than one third of the total *world* travel energy use in 1997, and that the great increase in American emissions is especially attributable to the rising popularity of “light trucks,” which includes SUVs, throughout the 1990s. In addition to global warming, there is the larger issue of air pollution in general, to which automobiles contribute. Pollution-induced health problems range from asthma and other respiratory problems to cancer, birth defects, and additional human illnesses, plus the impact upon plants and animals (plant diseases, fish kills, acid rain, degradation of whole forests and ecosystems).

However, concerns about global warming, air pollution, and health can be linked with other topics as well. Global warming raises issues of justice, because the impact of climate change induced by global warming will fall heaviest on developing countries and on poorer citizens. Dependency on fossil fuels raises issues of world peace, because numerous conflicts in the world seem motivated by the desire for access to petroleum resources. Larger vehicles like SUVs not only consume more fuel but also cause greater damage to other vehicles when accidents occur, raising issues of safety. If Christians seek to live under the Lordship of Christ, a Jesus Christ who is Creator, Savior, Great Physician, and Prince of Peace, say the authors, then Christians should care about all of these issues. For these reasons, they argue, transportation is a moral issue, and reducing energy consumption is one way Christians should respond.

The “What Would Jesus Drive?” resources contain another statistic that points to an additional theme they do not develop, but one that merits more attention. Three out of four commuters drive alone to work, they claim. That seems

<sup>10</sup>“What Would Jesus Drive?” (Discussion Paper Introduction).

wasteful, in terms of energy use, but that is not the only possible concern to raise. Does the automobile tend to isolate us, separating us into individual cocoons on wheels, reducing community?

One example of an articulate Christian reflection about issues of individual and community is provided by Eric O. Jacobsen, a Presbyterian pastor from Missoula, Montana, who has become involved in the Congress for the New Urbanism. This organization is concerned about the neglect and decline of cities, the impact of urban sprawl on the environment, and the separation of people by race and income, reducing ongoing human contact. In response, they seek to develop models for renewal. A portion of the “Charter of New Urbanism” declares, “We stand for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy [in other words, historic preservation].”<sup>11</sup>

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Jacobsen believes that the influence of the automobile is at least one factor contributing to urban problems. He writes:

Slowly, with the onset of the automobile, the limits on sprawl were all but obliterated. As cars freed up drivers to live, work, shop, and play between farther and farther distances, these great distances became a fixed part of the landscape, making the car necessary for full participation in society. The shift has been subtle, but unmistakable, as we’ve moved from thinking of the car as a convenience to considering it a necessity.<sup>12</sup>

One problem, says Jacobsen, is that “this arrangement, at best, grants independence to one particular segment of our population while leaving many out.” Those left out of a society organized around the automobile are the elderly, the disabled, the poor, and the young (which is why getting a driver’s license is so incredibly important to a teenager). Even those who have a car begin to experience diminishing returns, with all the time spent commuting, driving long distances to work or shop, sitting in traffic jams, moving from one far-flung activity to another.

Another unfortunate consequence of a city built around the needs of a car is the loss of “incidental contact.” In a previous era, one could walk the sidewalks of a neighborhood on the way to a nearby store, greeting people along the way who were seated on their front porches. Many typical suburbs today have no sidewalks, and houses feature decks in isolation on the back of a house instead of porches on the front, all of which are bypassed anyway as residents drive to a faraway mall or a

<sup>11</sup>Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003) 180.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.



big-box store. What is lost is the opportunity for both fleeting encounters and substantial conversations in the many everyday moments of our lives. Jacobsen wants to highlight “the unique value of incidental contact in building intimacy among people.”<sup>13</sup> He envisions a city in which people walk more and drive less, with communities designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car, where streets and squares are configured to help neighbors get to know one another. Thus, Jacobsen cleverly titles his book *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*.

In all of this, Jacobsen seeks to relate Christian principles to these modern urban issues. He is aware that most Christians find urban planning somewhat irrelevant to the Christian faith. Yet, Jacobsen notes that in the literature of secular authors about the city, including those associated with New Urbanism, “I found convergent themes of longing for community, joy, beauty, place, connection with our past, and meaning.” These are ideas and issues “in which the church community has also been very much interested.”<sup>14</sup> Further, Jacobsen suggests that Americans have taken basic national values of individualism, independence, and freedom to such an extreme that we have made them into false gods. When the emphasis on individualism leaves no concern for society, or when independence and freedom become “escape from anything or anyone that is annoying or inconvenient to us,” we have lost the call to love and community that is a vital part of the Christian message.

The “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign and Eric Jacobsen’s involvement with New Urbanism are samples of the kind of reflection Christians could offer in assessing and responding to the role of the automobile in American life. When features of popular culture, like the automobile, surround us and fill our lives, we can let them operate upon us blindly or we can reflect upon their wider significance and subtle influences. Those who select reflection then are empowered to make choices, embracing what they value and rejecting what they do not, instead of acting as pawns in someone else’s game. ⊕

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 15.