

Trapped in the Cult of the Next Thing

If ever there was a cult that gave us stones when we asked for bread, this is it.

Mark Buchanan

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I belong to the Cult of the Next Thing. It's dangerously easy to get enlisted. It happens by default—not by choosing the cult, but by failing to resist it. The Cult of the Next Thing is consumerism cast in religious terms. It has its own litany of sacred words: *more, you deserve it, new, faster, cleaner, brighter*. It has its own deep-rooted liturgy: *charge it, instant credit, no down-payment, deferred payment, no interest for three months*. It has its own preachers, evangelists, prophets, and apostles: ad men, pitchmen, celebrity sponsors. It has, of course, its own shrines, chapels, temples, meccas: malls, superstores, club warehouses. It has its own sacraments: credit and debit cards. It has its own ecstatic experiences: the spending spree.

Most of us spend more time with advertisements than with Scripture.

The Cult of the Next Thing's central message proclaims, "Crave and spend, for the Kingdom of Stuff is here." Sanctification is measured by never saving *enough*: for the cult teaches that our lives *are* measured by the abundance of our possessions. Those caught up in the Cult of the Next Thing live endlessly, relentlessly for, well, the Next Thing—the next weekend, the next vacation, the next purchase, the next experience. For us, the impulse to seek the Next Thing is an instinct bred into us so young it seems genetic. It's our paradigm, our way of seeing. It's our unifying Myth. How could the world be otherwise?

For Christians, this is a problem. The problem is ethical, spiritual, theological. And, of course, practical. The one time Jesus got violent was when the temple had been made into a marketplace. Jesus brooked a lot of things with uncanny calmness—demoniacs yelling at him, religious leaders plotting against him, thick-headed, slow-hearted disciples bossing him. But moneychangers and holy-trinket sellers put a wildness in him. And lest we miss the object lesson, Jesus puts his opposition to the Cult of the Next Thing in plain speech:

No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. ... So don't worry about having enough food or drink or clothing. Why be like the pagans who are so deeply concerned about these things? Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs (Matt. 6:24, 31–32, NLT).

Paul, too, had a thing or two to say about the cult:

People who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows (1 Tim. 6:9–10).

We know all this, but simply knowing it doesn't usually help. The cult is big, powerful, well organized, flawlessly run. It is so dominating it can usurp almost any impulse—even the impulse toward simplicity: You can package it, market it, and make a profit off of it. It renders even its enemies into minions, turns even protests against it into pithy slogans. Recently, a whole range of ads—from cars to clothes to CD players—have traded on a growing resentment against commercialism. Forty-thousand-dollar sports utility vehicles are touted as the magic means of escaping the artificiality of a world locked into work and shopping. These ads are put together without any hint of irony.

No satisfaction

I am writing this on a computer I bought a little over a year ago. Then, it was one of the most powerful and advanced machines available to the ordinary consumer. Now, a year and some months later, it is, by industry standards, sluggish and clumsy, unable to handle the latest innovation in software.

But here's the real problem: all that bothers me. I look, every week, at the fliers from computer and electronics superstores and see computers more powerful, with greater speed and bigger monitors and much more memory—and for considerably less money than I paid—and it bothers me. I feel cheated. I feel saddled with a clunker. I wonder: Should I upgrade? Should I trade up? Yet here I sit, the words popping up as fast as I type them, amenable, at the stroke of a key or the click of a mouse, to all kinds of effortless manipulation—cut-and-paste, deletion or duplication, spell and grammar checks, graphic enhancements. I have dozens of fonts and pictures, and if that doesn't please me, I can pull up endless more from CD-ROMs.

This computer will play music while I work. It can answer my phone. It can link me to the resource catalog of the New York Public Library. I can shop for just about anything, pay for it, and have it delivered, all without leaving my chair. This computer talks to me—a lovely, slightly seductive female voice, perfectly pitched between a business tone and an intimate one. I have a microphone, and if I could figure out how it worked, I could talk to this computer. This machine is more than I'll ever need. It is, in truth, more than I'll ever use: whole sections of its labyrinthine workings are *terra incognita* to me, a middle earth of the grotesque and the exotic. But every week the fliers come, and this computer doesn't seem enough.

I told you, I belong to the Cult of the Next Thing. If ever there was a cult that gave us stones when we asked for bread, this is it. It promises so much. Look at the ads. If you get this car, take that trip, buy these clothes, use this detergent—what joy! What fulfillment will finally and fully be yours!

One of the strangest ads I ever saw was a television commercial for Kool-Aid. It showed a bunch of kids sitting slumped and sullen on a gorgeous summer day. They're bored, numbed with it. It's almost a portrait of suicidal despair. Why go on living? Then the mother brings out a round, dew-beaded pitcher of Kool-Aid, ruby red and jiggling with ice. The kids go crazy. They leap, they clap, they cheer, they run, they gulp. This, yes this, is something to live for! The impression we're given is that the exuberance over that moment lives long past the moment: that there is something redemptive about the pitcher of Kool-Aid, that it restores purpose and hope to all of life. Well, my own children like Kool-Aid. Just not that much.

The silence of simplicity

I'm working on the discipline of ignoring the god of Things, of dropping out of that cult. What helps best is to cultivate a substitute discipline. I practice simplicity.

I built a shed this past summer. My garden equipment—shovels and rakes, a fertilizer broadcaster, a lawnmower, hoses and sprinklers—were aging and rusting too quickly leaning against the house. And someone kept stealing my gas can. So I decided I needed a shed. I went down to the building supply store in town. The cheapest one—emphasis on *cheap*—was \$500. That was too much. But while I was looking at one store, I noticed a large lot of cedar two-by-fours being cleared out—600 feet for \$50. I bought it, and went home and framed up the shed. It sat, skeletal, for several weeks. Then a friend offered me the sheathing board to cover its exterior; he had bought a lot of wood on clearance the year before and wasn't going to use the sheathing. Over the next month, I scavenged. Driving by a house that had just been built, I noticed that several bundles of unused shingles and a partial roll of tar paper sat in the side lot. I tracked down the contractor and made a deal. I got them for half price. I found an old door and some planks for shelving in the crawl space at the church. And so it went: foraging, salvaging, bartering, scrounging, improvising. In the end, I had a great shed. It cost about \$300, but I recently saw one like it in a catalog for \$1,800.

In one sense, this wasn't simple. It took more time—a lot more—than if I had simply bought a kit and put it together in a day. Sometimes simplicity is just trading one complexity for another. But the time, most of it, was spent en route, as I went. It was more adventure than project. In the course of it, I had some good conversations, met some new people. My wife and children got the benefit of my childlike joy when I came home to announce, "You won't believe it. I've just been given all the batting for finishing the edges on the shed."

There's a deeper lesson here. In the midst of living this way, I have come to appreciate small things more. I made a garden in the front of my house. I gathered all the elements—granite rock to edge it, soil, trees, flowers, driftwood—the same way I got the material for the shed. Because it took work—a dedication to simplicity doesn't always come simply—I delight in the color of the flowers. I see the bees flit from one to the next, and it gives me a deep down satisfaction. Those bees are a signature of divine pleasure—God must like what I've done. I'm not sure I would think that—or even much notice the bees—if I had paid a landscaper to do the work.

But sometimes simplicity means forsaking the garden for the wilderness. Nehemiah did that. He was willing to walk away from the luxuries of the lavish Persian court—the gardens and pools and palaces—to go live among the miseries of ramshackle Jerusalem, with its open sewers and piles of rubble. Why? God had put it in his heart (Neh. 2:12).

The quest for simplicity can lapse into legalism. It can decay into brittle, mirthless austerity, or puff itself up into heroic do-it-yourselfism. And then it's as barren as the Cult of the Next Thing. I once spoke with a man who imposed on his family fasting from television for a year. He said it was terrible. His family still resents him for it.

Simplicity is something more, something other than just doing without or doing it yourself. Its essence is neither forsaking nor striving. Its essence, rather, is

listening: What has God put in your heart? Simplicity is, once having discerned that, being content with it. Simplify it further: simplicity is being content with God.

Mammon is a good servant—obliging, gracious, versatile. As a servant, he's willing to be used for anything. He'll slum or hobnob, it doesn't matter. I've used money for a holiday in Thailand, bought Thai silk, rode an elephant, snorkeled amid schools of bright-colored fish. And I've used money to buy those sticky wax rings that seal sewer pipes on toilets. Mammon was handy in both instances.

But Mammon makes a poor god—demanding, capricious, conniving. He's surly and brutish, rarely lets you sleep well or long. He is sometimes generous, in a fickle way, but has a well-practiced habit of depriving us of taking deep and lasting pleasure in his gifts: he brings with his gifts the sour aftertaste of ingratitude (it's not enough), or fear (it won't last), or insatiableness (I want more). Maybe this is the worst irony of the Cult of the Next Thing: It trains us, not to value things too much, but to value them too little. It teaches us not to cherish and enjoy anything. Otherwise, we might be content and not long for the Next Thing.

And this: Mammon outshouts God. It's hard to hear what God has put in your heart with Mammon roaring. I write this on an island between Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland. Earlier in the day, I walked along a forest trail and returned to my cabin along the shoreline. The greenness of the water, the clatter of stone and shell underfoot, the natural sculpture of driftwood: it is a gallery of art. I sat on a shelf of sandstone that sloped down to the water. The sandstone, with its pits and ridges where the water's persistence has pried loose embedded stones, resembled a rough lizard hide, hugely magnified. This is a place of good silence. There are sounds, but they are woven into the texture of air and earth and water. It is a place for listening.

Walking home, in early evening, I heard voices. They sounded near, but they weren't. They came from across a vast expanse of water, sweeping effortlessly, like herons skimming the water's surface, over the distance. The voices traveled that distance intact, the shades of inflection still in them, no echo blurring their edges. I heard every word.

Simplicity is like a silence. It is a place for listening to a Voice that otherwise we might never hear.

Enough is enough

After silence comes speaking. There are two sayings, plain sayings, that are helping me live into simple contentment with God and what God puts in my heart. The first is "thank you."

I was in Uganda, Africa, about seven years ago, in a little township called Wairacka. Every Sunday evening, about 100 Christians from the neighboring area would gather to worship. They met under a tin-roof lean-to that was set at the edge of a cornfield. They sat—when they did sit—on rough wood benches. The floor was dirt. The instruments were old. Some of the guitars didn't have all the strings. But could they worship! They made hell run for shelter when they got loose. There was one guy with us, a real stiff-backed, buttoned-down white boy who liked his worship staid and orderly and brief, and even he couldn't stand still: he was jumping, clapping, yelling out his hallelujahs.

One Sunday evening, the pastor asked if anyone had anything to share. A tall, willowy woman came to the front. She was plain featured, but she was beautiful. "Oh, brothers and sisters, I love Jesus so much," she started.

"Tell us, sister! Tell us!" the worshipers shouted back.

"Oh, I love him so much, I don't know where to begin to tell you how good he is."

"Begin there, sister! Begin right there!"

"Oh," she said, "he is so good to me. I praise him all the time for how good he is to me. For three months, I prayed to the Lord for shoes. And look!" And at that the woman cocked up her leg so that we could see one foot. One very ordinary shoe covered it. "He gave me shoes. Hallelujah, he is so good." And the Ugandans clapped and yelled and shouted back, *Hallelujah!*

I didn't. I was devastated. I sat there hollowed out, hammered down. In all my life I had not once prayed for shoes. And in all my life I had not once thanked God for the many, many shoes I had.

As I later tried to sort that out, I looked at a lot of Scriptures about being thankful. I discovered that being thankful and experiencing the power and presence of Jesus Christ are tightly entwined. As we practice thankfulness, we experience more of God's transforming grace, God's thereness.

I looked again at 1 Thessalonians 5:18: "No matter what happens, always be thankful." And then at Ephesians 5:20: "Always give thanks for everything to God." And it came to me that the deepest theological concept is not the doctrine of the Incarnation, or the theories of Atonement, or the arguments for theodicy. Not views on premillennialism or supralapsarianism, nor ideas about tribulationism or dispensationalism. No, the deepest theological concept is thankfulness. Because to know God is to thank God. To worship God is to thank God. And to thank God in all things and for all things is to acknowledge that God is good, perfectly good, and perfectly just, and perfectly powerful—and that all things do work together for good for those who love God and have been called according to God's purposes.

Thankfulness is an act of subversion against the Cult of the Next Thing.

The other saying, like "thank you" both simple and hard, is "enough." In the Garden of Eden the first thing the serpent did was create in Adam and Eve a sense of scarcity. "Did God really say you must not eat any of the fruit in the garden?" (Gen. 3:1).

God did say—*commanded*, in fact— that they "may freely eat any fruit in the garden except fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of its fruit, you will surely die" (Gen. 2:16). The serpent's trick, then as now, is to turn this staggering abundance and gracious protection into frightening scarcity and bullying deprivation, the stinginess of a despot.

The serpent lied, and we got taken in. Now, despite the overwhelming evidence that we live amidst overflowing abundance—abundant food, clothes, warmth, friends,

things—we always feel it's not enough. We sense it's running out, it's insufficient. We live for the Next Thing.

There is an Indian parable about this. A guru had a disciple and was so pleased with the man's spiritual progress that he left him on his own. The man lived in a little mud hut. He lived simply, begging for his food. Each morning, after his devotions, the disciple washed his loincloth and hung it out to dry. One day, he came back to discover the loincloth torn and eaten by rats. He begged the villagers for another, and they gave it to him. But the rats ate that one, too. So he got himself a cat. That took care of the rats, but now when he begged for his food he had to beg for milk for his cat as well. "This won't do," he thought. "I'll get a cow." So he got a cow and found he had to beg now for fodder. So he decided to till and plant the ground around his hut. But soon he found no time for contemplation, so he hired servants to tend his farm. But overseeing the labors became a chore, so he married to have a wife to help him. After time, the disciple became the wealthiest man in the village.

The guru was traveling by there and stopped in. He was shocked to see that where once stood a simple mud hut there now loomed a palace surrounded by a vast estate, worked by many servants. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked his disciple.

"You won't believe this, sir," the man replied. "But there was no other way I could keep my loincloth."

I know this trap. Earlier, I held up my shed as an example of simplicity. But why did I build it? There was no other way I could keep my rakes and shovels, my lawn mower and gas can. This business of enough is slippery: the staked pit of legalism on one side, the quicksand of rationalization on the other. What is enough? I think I'm learning to live with enough, but what I call enough is staggering lavishness to most of the world.

A woman from a poor village in Bangladesh was visiting a Christian family in Toronto, and the morning after she arrived she looked out the kitchen window of the people's home. "Who lives in that house?" she asked the woman from Toronto.

"Which house?"

"That one, right there."

"Oh, that. No one lives there. That's a 'house' for the car."

The woman from Bangladesh was nonplused. "A house for the car," she kept saying. "A house for the car."

I picture that woman, looking out my kitchen window and seeing my garden shed, puzzled, saying again and again, "A house for the shovels. A house for the lawn mower."

We live in a culture of excess. A culture of more. A culture where we need to accumulate endlessly just to keep the loincloth. And the only way to break it is deliberately to lay hold of another way of seeing and living: we need an attitude of

enough. G. K. Chesterton said, "There are two ways to get enough. One is to accumulate more and more. The other is to need less." The attitude of enough—actually, it's a spiritual orientation— is marked by trust, contentment, and thankfulness. It is the decision, without rationalization, to say, "This is enough. My home is big enough. My car is new enough. My possessions are plenty enough. I've eaten enough. I've taken enough. Enough is enough."

And when we begin to live out the spirituality of enough, there comes a point when we see that maybe we have more than enough.

Just say no

There is a lady I know who lives this way, thankful with enough. Her name is Helen, and she attends the church of which I am the pastor. Helen is who I want to be when I grow up. She lives, as far as I can discern, completely outside the Cult of the Next Thing. She doesn't even defy it: she ignores it.

Helen has every reason to fear scarcity: never to say *enough*, never to say *thank you*. She grew up in Russia during Stalin's purges and engineered famines, and her family, of German origin, suffered terribly. When she was still in her early teens, she and five other girls from her village fled to Germany. It was a harrowing journey—across frozen or muddy fields, slipping through tangles of barbed wire. They left almost everything. They lost two children on the way from disease. Several times they came close to starving. There are photos of them with stark flesh and sharp bones, eyes defiant and sorrowful and afraid, gathered in a huddle. Their clothes hang loose.

Her family later tried to join her. But the Russians caught up with Helen's parents and siblings and sent them in stinking, crammed cattle cars to Siberia, where her parents died.

Helen remained in Germany. She worked there for a woman who threatened to shoot her if she ever tried to leave. She didn't try. Anyway, Hitler found her useful: he put her to work digging ditches for his war. There is a photo of Helen, rawboned in a plain dirndl, standing with other women beside a pile of raw, wet earth. They hold shovels. Guards are in the background, at the edge of the photo. The women smile. The guards don't.

After the war, Helen came to Canada. She had a cousin in Manitoba, a prosperous realtor and a church elder, and he and his wife took Helen in as their housemaid. Helen believed the grief was over, now only a memory to scatter under the weight of forgetting and forgiving. She was wrong. Her cousin raped her, repeatedly. She owed her cousin and his wife the money for sponsoring her trip to Canada. She didn't yet speak English. Alone, afraid, she gave in to him. Helen got pregnant. Both the church and her cousin's family banished her and the child.

Helen came west. In time she married and lived modestly. Several years ago, her husband died and left her a small pension. She has every reason to hoard, to hide, to be angry. She has every reason to have banished the words *thank you* and *enough* from her speaking and thinking. And yet those words define her life, shape its inner places and outward forms.

Money, things—they don't give freedom.

One day in church as I led prayer, I asked if there was anyone who would like to thank God for anything. Helen stood up. "Oh, Pastor Mark," she said. "I praise God!"

"Tell us about it, Helen."

"Well, the other day, it was such a beautiful day. I decided to wash my car, and as I'm washing, what do I notice? My insurance expired three days earlier. Well, right away, I walked downtown and bought new insurance. Then, I was telling a friend of mine about it, and she said, 'You're lucky. That happened to me, and the police stopped me. I was fined \$300.' "

I thought that was the end of her story —praising God that the police didn't catch her. But it wasn't the end of the story.

Helen says, "God has given me \$300. That's how I see it. The Lord has done this. So I asked, 'Lord, what am I to do with this \$300?' He said, 'Give it to the church.' So today, I have \$300 to give to the church, and I'm praising God.' "

Another time, our church held a business meeting. The big vote that night was whether to hire a youth pastor. Our church finances had not been strong, and many people were saying that we just couldn't afford a youth pastor, even though the need was great.

Helen got up. She is 73 years old. She has one daughter—her child from her cousin—who is middle-aged. She has four grandchildren, who live in another city. Helen has two stepdaughters with children. They also live elsewhere. She has no vested interest in youth work in our church.

Helen said, "When I lived in Russia, growing up, I wanted so much to have a piano and to play it. But I could never afford it. When I married, we had a piano, but I never learned to play it. Last month, I decided that I could now afford \$60 a month and fulfill my dream since I was a girl. I signed up for piano lessons." She stopped. Her voice was breaking. She continued, slow, soft. "Tonight, I realize that our young people are far more important than my learning how to play the piano. I love young people and want them to know about Jesus. So I am going to quit piano lessons and give that money every month for a youth pastor."

That changed everything. The church voted unanimously to hire a youth pastor. It's what one person can do who, having enough, being continuously thankful, pays no tribute to the Cult of the Next Thing.

God vs. the pig-god

Money, things—they don't give freedom. Freedom, rather, is in the opposite direction, in refusing to love money, to pay Things an honor they don't deserve, to give to the Cult an affection it will never requite. To live, real freedom requires something more than, other than, force of will. Earlier, I spoke about defying Mammon, breaking out of his cult. But that in itself leads nowhere. Once we defy it, then what? If we refuse the lure of the Next Thing, what will we replace it with?

The answer is God. We will live—fully, joyfully—in the presence of God. Consumerism's worst effect is it shunts us away from God's presence. It always ushers us into the wrong place. Is it possible that the God who made the heavens and the earth, who hewed mountains and poured seas, the God who raises the dead, the God who knit you together in your mother's womb, numbered your days, knows your thoughts, knows you by name, and says to you, "Everything I have is yours"—is it possible, I'm asking, that that's not enough? That we won't be happy until our kitchen is renovated, or we've bought a better car, or visited Europe? And then we won't be happy anyway? Is that possible? The Cult of the Next Thing guarantees it.

Is God who he says he is? That is the crux. If God isn't, then "let's eat, drink, and be merry. ... What's the difference, for tomorrow we die" (Isa. 22:13; 1 Cor. 15:32). But if God is God, it is only a cruel form of self-spite to spurn the true God for a lesser god—especially a sloppy, bullying ingrate like Mammon, the pig-god, and his miserable cult.

Joyce Carol Oates wrote a novel a few years ago called *Because It Is Bitter, & Because It Is My Heart*. The title comes from a Stephen Crane poem about a beast who devours his own heart and, when asked why, responds with that line. Oates's novel is about a young black boy and a young white girl in middle America in the 1950s. They fall in love, but of course everything in their world wars against their doing anything about that. Their options are completely shut down. All they can do, all they have freedom for, are acts of self-spite—self-mutilation, self-humiliation, self-recrimination, self-punishment. They resort to it and destroy the promise of their own lives.

The only freedom the Cult of the Next Thing grants us is acts of self-spite. Be cause it is bitter, and because it is my heart. Mammon has no need to hurt us. Worship him, you devour yourself. The stunning folly of this, the bewildering tragedy, is that we can choose otherwise. "Stay away from the love of money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, 'I will never fail you. I will never forsake you' " (Heb. 13:5).

Is that enough to be thankful for?

Mark Buchanan is pastor of the New Life Community Church, Duncan, British Columbia, Canada. This essay won the first place in [CT's](#) "Faith and Consumerism" contest, funded by the Global Consumption project of Pew Charitable Trusts, Inc.

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