



Alternative Currency:

An Economic Contrast of the Harlot & Bride in John's Apocalypse
& Implications for Alternative Ecclesiology in Consumptive Culture

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INTRODUCTION

The lure of Western Consumer Culture is strong upon the Church living in its shadow, leaving followers of Jesus in danger of compromise with consumerism. A striking biblical parallel is found in John's Apocalypse (Revelation), particularly the 'Tale of Two Cities' (Rev. 17-18, 21-22), where 'Babylon' (Rome) and the New Jerusalem (the Church) are sharply contrasted. The Apocalypse was written to the seven churches in Asia Minor, who were also in danger of compromise with Imperial Rome. John 'comforts the afflicted' who *suffer* under the Empire, but 'afflicts the comfortable' who *collude* with its idolatry. Maier argues that modern 'first-world' readers should read the Apocalypse from the disturbing perspective of being a Laodicean.¹ This essay's exploration of the 'Tale of Two Cities' will develop what the Apocalypse might say to modern Laodicean Christians. Our question will be: *Based on John's contrast of the Harlot and the Bride, how is the Church to be an alternative community in the midst of contemporary consumptive culture?*

Approach & Structure

This essay will have two major sections: Biblical and Contemporary Ecclesiology; each with three parallel sub-sections: **Context**, **Compromise**, and **Calling**. The subsections of the Biblical Ecclesiology section are as follows:

- The **Context** section will explore the world of Imperial Rome, and John's contrast between 'Babylon' and New Jerusalem (with a special focus on economics).
- The **Compromise** section will outline John's warning to the Christians who had colluded with Babylon's commercial system.
- The **Calling** section will set forth ecclesiological implications from John's vision for an alternative community.

I will argue that John's Apocalypse calls the Church to be an *alternative theopolitical community* (refusing participation in Imperial worship and commerce).

The insights from the biblical section will inform and frame the subsequent discussion of the contemporary Church within consumptive culture. The sub-sections of the *Contemporary Ecclesiology* section will parallel those of the biblical section:

¹ Harry O. Maier, "Coming Out Of Babylon", in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 78; see also Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 30ff, esp. 38-39.

- The **Context** section will explore how consumer ideology and systems influence desire, belonging and identity.
- The **Compromise** section will address ways in which the modern Church has compromised with consumer culture.
- The **Calling** section will set forth a proposal for a contemporary alternative *theopolitical* ecclesiology in the midst of consumptive culture.

I will argue that an *alternative theopolitical community* can only be characterised by deep Christ-centred desire, community, and identity.

Before moving to the Biblical Ecclesiology section, we must note briefly how we will address the issue of genre in the Apocalypse, and the ‘eschatological’ nature of the Church.

‘APOCALYPTIC’ & THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CHURCH

Apocalyptic: Ultimate Reality ‘Unveiled’

Appreciation of genre is essential for interpretation of the Apocalypse. It offers no single “consistent interpretive strategy”, thus frustrating those who expect to find one.² It is a varied and intertextual tapestry, and is best classified as a *mixed genre* work.³ Instead of genre, Barr emphasizes the effect that an apocalypse like John’s has on its readers, taking them “beyond the veil of limited human experience to a secret world where all meaning becomes clear.”⁴

Rather than reading the Apocalypse with a preterist, historicist, futurist, or idealist lens, David deSilva adopts a ‘contemporary-historical’ approach.⁵ Though his audience must await the fullness of the *eschaton* (the ‘last things’), John’s purpose in writing is not simply to predict the future, but to “lift the veil from contemporary actors, events, and opinions.”⁶ They must live out their future in the present.

² Linton, “Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse”, in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 26.

³ Ibid, 39, 40.

⁴ David L. Barr, “Beyond Genre: The Expectations of Apocalypse”, in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 77, 86-87.

⁵ David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2-8.

⁶ Ibid, 14; see also Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 168; and Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 273; David Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative*

Eschatology: The 'Already-But-Not-Yet' Church

The Church is thus an *eschatological*, or 'already-but-not-yet' community, called to witness to the Age to Come in the Present Age.⁷ John wants his readers to see past the apparent glory and luxury of Rome to her true nature: *a beastly harlot*; and past the present insignificance and persecution of the Church to see her true identity: *a pure bride*.

Revelation has been the victim of readings that see it as a coded forecast of future events, such as Hal Lindsay's infamous *The Late Great Planet Earth*.⁸ When read in ways such as this that rob it of its contemporary significance, the need for urgent resistance *now* is panned out of frame.⁹ As we saw above, the Apocalypse is a mixed-genre work that will not allow for such readings. As Barr argues, "Revelation does not reveal what heaven is like; it reveals what everyday life is like by showing the everyday in relation to the ultimate."¹⁰ John's collage reveals the *telos* for the Church, the reference point toward which they wait and work.¹¹ This essay will therefore read Revelation as an Apocalypse that unveils the way things really are in the present, as well as hinting at the way things shall be.

BIBLICAL ECCLESIOLOGY (1st CENTURY)

This section will work from the ancient context of Rome, in which the Church struggled to remain faithful to Jesus in spite of the hegemonic influence of Imperial Rome. The sub-sections here will be as follows:

- The **Ancient Context** section will explore the world of Imperial Rome, and John's contrast between Babylon and the New Jerusalem; giving special attention to the vast commerce in the Roman world, and the pervasive power of the Imperial Cult.

Commentary on the Book of Revelation (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press), 66-67.

⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, 398-400.

⁸ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

⁹ Dean Flemming, "'On Earth as It Is in Heaven': Holiness and the People of God in Revelation," in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, eds. Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 343.

¹⁰ Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2004), 142.

¹¹ Marva J. Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness: A Gift of Hope from the Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 203.

- The **Ancient Compromise** section will outline how and why some Christians were comfortably involved with Roman commerce, and look at John's urgent warning to those in the Church who had colluded with Babylon's idolatrous economic system.
- The **Ancient Calling** section will set forth the ecclesiological calling implied from John's vision for an alternative community, particularly to be an *eschatological* and *theopolitical* community.

I will argue that this *alternative theopolitics* must be characterised by prophetic and subversive worship of God alone, and by faithful advocacy and action for economic justice.

ANCIENT CONTEXT: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

GENERAL CONTRASTS: Character & Activity

John unveils Rome as the 'harlot' Babylon (17:1) and the Church as the 'bride', the New Jerusalem (21:2, 9).¹² It is clear from several textual parallels that John is deliberately and rhetorically contrasting the two cities.¹³ Attention is called to both by "one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls", who both times says, "Come, I will show you..." (17:1 & 21:9) and carries the Seer "away in the spirit" (17:3 & 21:10).

These similarities hold the subsequent contrasts in deliberate tension. As Maier writes, John "moves beyond contrast and comparison, driving home the point that the heavenly Jerusalem is everything Babylon is *not*."¹⁴ These contrasts will be presented in three tables (Tables 1-3).

¹² *pornēs* and *nymphēn*.

¹³ Richard Bauckham, "The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18", in *Images of Empire*, ed. Loveday Alexander (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 48; on reasons (its world-wide scope, both politically and commercially) why Rome rather than Jerusalem is in view, see Grant Macaskill, "Critiquing Rome's Economy: Revelation and Its Reception in the Apostolic Fathers", in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 247; and for an exploration of the gendered language of the comparison (and the Apocalypse more generally), see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Babylon the Great: A Rhetorical-Political Reading of Revelation 17-18", in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 243-69.

¹⁴ Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 191.

Babylon	New Jerusalem
Seen from a wilderness (17:3)	Seen from a great high mountain (21:10)
Rests on a scarlet beast (17:3)	Founded on apostles of the Lamb (21:14)
Adorned with precious stones (17:4)	Possesses jewel-like glory (21:11, 18-21)
Filled with abominations (17:4-5)	No abominations (21:27)
Sits on waters; from Earth (17:1; 5)	Descends from Heaven (21:10)
Doomed to destruction (18:8-9, 21)	Eternal (22:5)

Table 1

The following table (Table 2) highlights the contrast between the seductive, violent activities of the harlot city, and the humble, peaceful activity in the bride city.¹⁵

Babylon	New Jerusalem
A harlot, luxuriously clothed to seduce many (17:4)	A chaste bride, adorned for one husband (21:3, 9-11, 19)
Makes saints suffer (17:6)	City of healing for the nations; no more suffering (21:2, 22:2)
Kings of earth gather to war against (17:16)	Kings of earth bring their "glory and honor" into her gates (21:24)
Traders mourn loss of commerce (18:9-19)	Kings of earth show allegiance to her (21:26)
Impure and gathers fornicators (and murderers) about her (17:2, 4, 5, 16)	Murderers, fornicators & idolaters barred from entering (21:8; 22:15)
The "great/mighty city" (18:9, 16, 18, 19, 21)	A 12- <i>thousand</i> 'stadia' cube (21:15-17)
Destroyed, then lies in darkness (18:23)	Night never falls (21:23, 25; 22:5)
No sound of weddings (18:23)	Descending in wedding celebration (21:2, 9)

Table 2

¹⁵ Based on content from Maier, "Coming Out of Babylon, 62-81; Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 191-92; Edith M. Humphrey, "A Tale of Two Cities and (At Least) Three Women: Transformation, Continuity, and Contrast in the Apocalypse", in *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 94-95; Richard Bauckham, *New Testament Theology: The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 131-2; Laurie Guy, *Making Sense of the Book of Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2009), 137-38; and Flemming, "On Earth as It Is in Heaven", 356-57.

ECONOMIC CONTRASTS: Conflicting Currencies

Bauckham writes that the harlot imagery in Rev. 17-18 is fundamentally about economics.¹⁶ For Koester, the imagery of prostitution “transforms the most intimate of relationships into a business transaction”.¹⁷ Kraybill highlights John’s use of deliberate intertextual echoes from Isaiah to unveil Roman Imperial hegemony as prostitution. “In the tradition of Isaiah, John now dismisses Roman commercial and political alliances as prostitution (Rev. 17.1-2; 18.3).”¹⁸ These key economic contrasts are as follows (Table 3):

Babylon	New Jerusalem
Costly & intoxicating ‘wine of fornication’ (17:2; 18:3)	Freely given & healing ‘water of life’ (21:6; 22:1-2)
Royal clothing & costly accessories speak of excessiveness (17:4; 18:3, 7, 9, 16)	Jewel-like appearance speaks of holy lifestyle (21:7; cf. 19:8)
Merchants gain (and lose!) riches from trading with (18:3, 11, 14-15, 17, 19, 22)	Overcomers possess glory & splendor by free inheritance (21:7)
Long list of traded goods – including humans (18:12-13)	Glory and honour of nations brought (not traded) (21:24)

Table 3



John’s depiction of Babylon is mirrored by the image on the reverse side of a rare sestertius from the period (see Figure 1), which features the goddess Roma, seated on

¹⁶ Bauckham, “Economic Critique”, 56.

¹⁷ Craig R. Koester, “Revelation’s Visionary Challenge to Ordinary Empire.” *Interpretation* 63.1 (2009), 17.

¹⁸ J.Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 154.

Rome's Seven Hills, corresponding to John's explanation (Rev. 17:9) that seven heads of the beast are the seven hills the woman sits on.¹⁹

Particularly breathtaking, and significant for our analysis, is the exhaustive list of commodities in 18:12-13.²⁰ This listing, with the surrounding funeral dirge lamenting the fall of Babylon echoes and borrows from the strikingly similar word against Babylon in Jeremiah 50-51, and Tyre in Ezekiel 27:5-24.²¹ At the *end* of the list of luxury goods is "*sōmaton kai psychas anthrōpon*" ('the bodies and souls of humans'), highlighting the enslaving nature of the trade.²²

Kraybill draws attention to frescoes, reliefs and coinage from the period which not only evidences the vastness of the maritime trade, but also the link between this trade and the pagan worship of the Roman Imperial Cult.²³ Rome had a seemingly insatiable hunger for a vast range of exotic goods, which Kraybill describes as "a warped spiritual obsession, a fetish" and an addiction to a demonic drug.²⁴ By contrast, the New Jerusalem also has a kind of 'trade' with the nations. It is not, however, the purchase of goods, but rather the peaceful, free exchange of the light of God and the Lamb (21:24), for the 'glory and honour' of the nations (21:24).²⁵ The "vicious and parasitic association of Babylon with others contrasts with the organic description of Jerusalem."²⁶

We also find an alternative listing (21:19-20) of the 12 precious stones adorning the 12 foundations of the New Jerusalem. Giving yet more evidence that Ezekiel was in the mind of John the Seer, these foundation stones correspond closely to the precious stones which adorned the king of Tyre before his fall (Ezek. 28:13).²⁷ William Reader avoids over-

¹⁹ David Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary, 52c: Revelation 17-22* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 920-21, 926.

²⁰ See Mounce, *Revelation*, 334, fn46 for discussion (following Bauckham) on the number of items being 28 (the number of the world [4], times the number of completeness [7]), implying that the list represented the entire world's range of products.

²¹ See esp. Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 152-60; also Bauckham, "Economic Critique", 51-54; and Mounce, *Revelation*, 333.

²² See Aune, *Revelation*, 1002; Mounce, *Revelation*, 334.

²³ The huge scope of the maritime trade is implicit in the mention of "shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea" – 18:17, 19; again, see the thorough treatment by Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 123-35.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 106.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 154; Linking N.J. (Rev. 21:24-26) again to Tyre (Isaiah 23:18: "...[Tyre's] merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who live in the presence of the Lord.").

²⁶ Humphrey, "A Tale of Two Cities and (At Least) Three Women", 94.

²⁷ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 207-9; Aune, *Revelation*, 1165.

interpretive parallels by concluding that the foundation stones simply “pose a contrast to the jewels adorning the whore of Babylon (Rev 17:4; 18:12, 16)”.²⁸

A final contrast highlights the central imperative for John’s readers. To those intoxicated by the harlot’s costly wine, the heavenly word is, “Come out of her, my people” (18:4).²⁹ However, to the thirsty, the Spirit and Bride extend the invitation to “Come!” and take freely of the water of life (22:17).

Conclusions

The effect of these contrasts is a striking *apokalupsis* (unveiling) of both Imperial Rome (Babylon) and the fledgling Church (New Jerusalem), revealing hidden qualities not seen with the naked undiscerning eye. Peaceful, glorious Rome is really a violent beastly haunt of demons; and the poor, insignificant Church is truly rich and powerful. The harlot’s unfaithfulness is unveiled as an economics of excess and exploitation, while the faithfulness of the bride is revealed by her alternative economic posture of distinctive resistance and generous, welcoming community. As we shall see, these descriptions also prescribe – they issue a jolting wake-up call to the Christians in Asia Minor who have been lured into compromise with Rome.

ANCIENT COMPROMISE: ACCOMMODATING JEZEBEL

Some followers of Jesus were enticed by and participated in Rome’s pagan economy and apparent prosperity. However, this prosperity was tainted, writes deSilva, because Babylon was “drunk with the blood of the saints who held up an alternative definition of life”, and it was gained “at the cost of denying ‘the testimony of Jesus’.”³⁰ This rebuke of unfaithfulness has been a major theme of his Apocalypse.³¹ This kind of idolatrous collusion with the Beast had some churches in danger of being spewed from the mouth of Jesus, and losing table fellowship with him (3:16, 20).

²⁸ William W. Reader, “The Twelve Jewels of Revelation 21:19-20: Tradition History and Modern Interpretations”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100.3 (1981), 456; see also David Mathewson, “A Note on the Foundation Stones in Revelation 21:14, 19-20”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25.4 (2003), 487-498.

²⁹ Bauckham, “Economic Critique”, 86.

³⁰ David A. deSilva, “The Revelation to John: A Case Study in Apocalyptic Propaganda and the Maintenance of Sectarian Identity”, *Sociological Analysis* 53.4 (1992), 385.

³¹ From the opening blessing to “those who hear and obey” the word (1:3), and the subsequent warning to repent given to five of the seven churches (Ephesus, 2:5; Pergamum, 2:16; Thyatira, 2:22; Sardis, 3:3; Laodicea, 3:19).

The *Sitz im Leben* of John's audience, according to Koester, varied from *open hostility* (even death), to *assimilation* (varying degrees of participation with Imperial Rome), and *complacency arising from wealth*.³² The call to 'come out' of Babylon makes it clear that some were asleep to the violence of the empire toward their fellow believers, and to its seductive power over them.

John's language of 'fornication' includes these believers who colluded with imperial socio-political structures. Membership in the trade guilds was not simply about money. Kraybill writes that "people involved in international travel and trade were likely to venerate the emperor because they benefited from the security that Rome provided."³³ The patronage system also held together not merely the selling and buying of goods, but also the exchange of imperial worship and imperial blessings – including maintenance of social rank and status.³⁴

Some of John's audience would have been used to participating in the trade guilds (and the emperor worship that went along with it), and would have been hesitant to give up economic prosperity and imperial protections.³⁵ They would likely have found John's critique to be "strange and excessive."³⁶ Carter provides plausible reasons that some Christians used to justify their accommodation with 'Babylon' (Rome).³⁷ They may have felt that participation in Rome's socio-economic structures was necessary for survival and in accordance with biblical examples (i.e. Joseph in Egypt – Genesis 37-50). Confrontation or resistance could have been seen to be poor evangelistic strategy, or theologically unnecessary, if the idols, images and rituals associated with socioeconomic life had no real power.

³² Koester, "Revelation's Visionary Challenge to Ordinary Empire", 7-9.

³³ J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 144.

³⁴ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 145-7. On rank and status in Graeco-Roman culture, see Edwin Judge, *Rank and Status in the World of the Caesars and St. Paul: The Broadhead Memorial Lecture 1981* (Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 1982).

³⁵ Blount, *Revelation*, 332-33.

³⁶ Koester, "Revelation's Visionary Challenge to Ordinary Empire", 5.

³⁷ Warren Carter, "Accommodating 'Jezebel' and Withdrawing John: Negotiating Empire in Revelation." *Interpretation* 63.1 (2009), 37-39.

ANCIENT CALLING: AN ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY

Coming out of Babylon and coming into New Jerusalem necessitates an inverted or ‘alternative’ understanding of worship and politics to the empire. In this section, using a metaphor of the ‘theopolitical coin’, I will outline the Church’s calling to be an *alternative* ‘theopolitical’ community.

The term ‘theopolitical’ mends the false divide between ‘politics and religion’ – ‘secular and sacred’.³⁸ To be *theopolitical* is to be characterised by “absolute submission to God, on the one hand, and equality with respect to all neighbours, on the other”, resisting and subverting both the idolatry and politics of empire.³⁹

THE THEOPOLITICAL COIN: An Alternative Currency

The *theopolitical* coin has two sides. The ‘heads’ side, theology, reflects objects of allegiance which are venerated and worshipped. The ‘tails’ side, politics, represents socio-political structures and activities.⁴⁰ Worship and politics, as we have seen, were deeply enmeshed in the Roman Empire through the Imperial Cult, which infiltrated trade and commerce.⁴¹ Thus, if the Roman coin is ‘heads-Caesar-tails-Babylon’, the Church’s alternative currency is ‘heads-Lamb-tails-New-Jerusalem.’

HEADS: Alternative Theology & Worship

The ‘heads’ of the *theopolitical* coin is *worship*. Worship is a strong theme in John’s Apocalypse.⁴² The worship of God and the Lamb is the liberating alternative to the enslaving idolatry of false worship of the Beast. The true worship of God and the Lamb (and with it, refusal to commit idolatry by worshipping the beast or his image; 20:4) is an essential and central component of the ‘faithful witness’ to which they are also called.⁴³ Participation in the Imperial Cult (and the worship of the Emperor) therefore was idolatrous.

³⁸ William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 1-3.

³⁹ Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 298.

⁴⁰ The Roman sestertius depicted above (Figure 1) well exemplifies the ‘theopolitical coin’; heads – Caesar (and the worship associated with the Imperial Cult), tails – the lady of Rome (and the socio-political entities which she both embodies and relates to). Ancient (and modern!) coins unfailingly have images of humans on the front (excepting, interestingly, coins minted by Jews for whom such images would be idolatrous) and images on the reverse which depict socio-political events or relationships.

⁴¹ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 144-7.

⁴² Rev. 3:9; 9:20; 11:1; 13:8-15; 14:7-11; 15:4; 19:10; 22:8-9.

⁴³ Olutola K. Peters, *The Mandate of the Church in the Apocalypse of John* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), 142-43.

Worship, after all, is not simply about formal orations, but about a lifestyle that reflected the character of one's Lord. The character of the Lord is revealed in the Apocalypse as the Lion who is the slain Lamb. It is the crucified Christ, not the conquering Caesar, who is Lord. His is a lordship that is not enforced with brute Imperial force, but rather enacted by way of the self-giving and self-emptying 'lamb power', which is such a key theme in the Apocalypse.⁴⁴

The simple alternative declaration "Jesus is *kurios* (Lord)" was dangerously revolutionary within a context where the same title belonged to Caesar.⁴⁵ Whenever believers pray and worship like this, they witness to an alternative reality where the culture of Babylon is overcome, and "Jerusalem happens."⁴⁶ The heavenly city "breaks into present reality whenever people take seriously the Lord's Prayer, 'Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt. 6.10)."⁴⁷

TAILS: Alternative Politics & Practice

The tails of the *theopolitical* coin is *politics*. Theological and imperial allegiances are inseparable from political and social outcomes and activities. As noted above, the vision of life embodied by the Church is to be defined not the Roman Empire and its ways, but by the Lamb and his ways.

An alternative *theopolitics* is deeply woven into the fabric of John's Apocalypse. So political is the message of the Apocalypse that Bauckham calls it "the most powerful piece of political resistance literature from the period of the early Empire."⁴⁸ John is thus a *resistance* rhetorician, and the Apocalypse is thus *resistance* literature.⁴⁹ This language of subversive 'resistance' is preferable to Carter's language of 'withdrawal', despite his helpful presentation of John's arguments.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ On 'Lamb Power', see Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 109-113.

⁴⁵ Caesar also held most of the titles given to Jesus in the 'Colossian Poem' (Col. 1:15-20).

⁴⁶ Maier, "Coming Out of Babylon", 77.

⁴⁷ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 221.

⁴⁸ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 38.

⁴⁹ Greg Carey, "Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation," in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L Barr (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 175ff.

⁵⁰ Carter, "Accommodating 'Jezebel' and Withdrawing John", 39-45; compare the language of 'boycotting' by Allan Dwight Callahan, "Babylon Boycott: The Book of Revelation," *Interpretation*, 63.1 (2009), 48-54.

Rome's general hostility (the *Pax Romana*), particularly the violence against martyrs shows it to be under both the Devil's control and God's judgment. Participation in the Imperial Cult and commerce, was to collude with 'beast power', and was nothing short of *idolatry*.⁵¹ John "believed Christians no longer could participate in an unjust commercial network thoroughly saturated with idolatrous patriotism."⁵² The only way to plant New Jerusalem seeds in the soil of Babylon was *subversive resistance*, even if it risked loss of rank and status, or life – or both.⁵³ As economic and political pressures rose in the following decades, allegiance to Jesus enabled the fledgling Church to survive.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

In this first major section, we have seen that John's 'unveiling' deliberately contrasts 'Babylon', the hegemonic Roman Imperial power, with 'New Jerusalem', the fledgling yet faithful Church in its shadow. The veil of reality is pulled back from both to reveal a beastly harlot on the one hand, and a beautiful bride on the other.

We have seen that some of the Christians were comfortably enjoying the commercial and social benefits of participation with Rome's global and enslaving commerce. The line between the faithful and the compromised was not easy to distinguish, as it was "not drawn around the churches but through their center."⁵⁵

In the face of such pressure, John steadfastly and urgently called the Church is to resist the lure of Babylon whatever the consequences.⁵⁶ They are called to the costly, ostracising, and often dangerous posture of subversive resistance of idolatrous Imperial power. This is the cost of being distinct; a "contrast people", an *alternative community*.⁵⁷

⁵¹ As opposed to 'Lamb Power'.

⁵² Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 23.

⁵³ For example, see the historically-responsible yet fictional collection of 'lost letters' between the martyr Antipas (Rev. 3:13) and Luke in Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Lost Letters of Pergamum: A Story from the New Testament World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). Antipas loses both his rank and his life, though finds transforming faith.

⁵⁴ David A. deSilva, "The Social Setting of the Revelation to John: Conflicts Within, Fears Without", *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992), 296.

⁵⁵ Maier, "Coming Out of Babylon", 71.

⁵⁶ Stephen Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 218.

⁵⁷ See Michael Goheen, *A Light To the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 182.

Having outlined John's prophetic call for the church of his day, these insights will frame our contemporary parallel as we consider how the modern Church is to be an *alternative community* in the shadow of the modern 'Babylon' of consumer culture.

CONTEMPORARY ECCLESIOLOGY (21ST CENTURY)

If, as established in the prior section, the Church is to be an *alternative community*, what might this look like today? This section will be framed by the above insights regarding the contrast of Babylon and the New Jerusalem, and will develop a contemporary ecclesiology for the Church in the midst of consumptive culture. The three sub-sections here will be a modern parallel to those in the Biblical Ecclesiology section above:

- The **Modern Context** section will explore the modern world of consumer culture, particularly how it effects a commodification of our desires, our sense of belonging, and our identities; with tragic consequences.
- The **Modern Compromise** section will address how the modern Church has compromised with the hegemonic powers of consumptive culture, by allowing Christian desire, community and identity to be commodified.
- The **Modern Calling** section will set forth a positive vision for contemporary ecclesiology in the midst of consumptive culture, highlighting the importance of alternative 'theopolitical' worship and witness, flowing from Christ-centred desire, community and identity.

MODERN CONTEXT: THE SOCIETY OF CONSUMERS (BAUMAN)

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that modern Western culture has undergone a dramatic shift from that of a 'society of producers' to a 'society of consumers'.⁵⁸ The strength of consumer culture is such that he calls consumerism "the *principal propelling and operating force* of society".⁵⁹ Consumer culture is "a situation in which elements of culture

⁵⁸ Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 54.

⁵⁹ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 28 (emphasis his).

are readily commodified.”⁶⁰ The following outline will address the commodification of desire, community and identity, as well as the resulting *theopolitics* of consumer culture.

CONSUMER DESIRE

In modern consumer culture, *desire itself* becomes a commodity. Consumerism plays upon our desires by offering commodities in *faster speed* and *greater quantity* – though always with *reduced quality*. While the society of producers was characterised by *delayed* gratification, the gratification of the society of consumers is characterised by being both *instant* and *fleeting*. Lasting satisfaction must be avoided at all costs.⁶¹ Bauman writes that a *satisfied* consumer is “the most terrifying menace” to consumer society.⁶²

No longer is enjoyment present only in the use of a product, but it is also found in the very act of desiring itself. Shopping, thus, can itself be said to be *recreational*. Vincent Miller agrees: consumer desire “is about the joy of desiring itself, rather than possessing.”⁶³ Like the ultimate carrot-stick, the promised happiness offered by consumerism remains tantalisingly just out of reach – thus keeping the consumer treadmill going. *I desire, therefore I consume*.

CONSUMER COMMUNITY

Modern consumer culture is also characterised by the commodification of community. Consumer culture is something to *belong to and be a part of*. For Bauman, the act of consuming is a kind of investment in “one’s own social membership”.⁶⁴ Particularly, consumerism is seen in the phenomenon of allegiance to and/or identification with brands. Naomi Klein describes the ‘new branded world’ in which corporate logos function as badges of allegiance and membership.⁶⁵ As Ward notes, these logos (which mimic the *Logos*) replace the vast diversity of goods they each stand for, thus creating a kind of ‘imaginary community’.⁶⁶ Acts of loyalty to brands (consuming products), reinforces our feelings of imaginary connectedness with other co-consumers. *I consume, therefore I belong*.

⁶⁰ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 72.

⁶¹ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 98.

⁶² Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 98.

⁶³ Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 144.

⁶⁴ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 56.

⁶⁵ For example, the ‘swoosh’ of Nike, the [partially-consumed!] ‘apple’ of Apple-Macintosh, the ‘green siren’ of Starbucks; see Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (Great Britain: Flamingo, 2000), chapters 1-5.

⁶⁶ Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*, 98.

CONSUMER IDENTITY

For these 'members' of modern consumer culture, the pressure to maintain one's consumer identity is powerful yet ever-changing in its manifestation. For Bauman, the 'style pack' defines who 'fits' or 'matters', what is 'in' – and who you must 'be' to be 'in'.⁶⁷ Consumer identity is the by-product of the unrelenting pressure to fit in with, keep up with, or stay ahead of the ever-changing 'style pack'. For Bauman, consumer culture is typified by a process of "serial births"; the continual cycle of the constructing and discarding of individual identities.⁶⁸ As a (very profitable) by-product, consumerism offers an ongoing invitation to be continually 'born-again'.⁶⁹

The chameleon of consumer identity retains the shape of having the 'freedom' of choice; having options – the ability to consume.⁷⁰ Consumerism tells a story of, and invites consumers into the progression out of 'unfreedom' (slavery) and into autonomy.⁷¹ The rite(s) of passage, of course, being consuming.

Consumers no longer merely 'consume to live', but 'live to consume'.⁷² We become whoever we need to be, at whatever time, according to whatever the current standard is for being faithful and free: *homo consumens*.⁷³ Consumption becomes the means to the end of maintaining a consumer identity. *I consume, therefore I am.*

CONSUMER THEOPOLITICS

Consumer Culture has a 'theology' and a 'politics' – a *consumer theopolitics*. On the 'heads' side of the *theopolitical* coin, Consumer theology is polytheistic. The gods of consumerism are the invisible or 'weightless' corporations whose images are manifested through their ever-visible logos.⁷⁴ Klein gives an apt description of the worship of the Nike 'god':

Each [Nike Town] is a shrine, a place set apart for the faithful, a mausoleum. The Manhattan Nike Town... is more than a fancy store fitted with the requisite brushed

⁶⁷ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 82-83.

⁶⁸ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 101.

⁶⁹ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 100-101.

⁷⁰ Mindy G. Makant, "The Pursuit of Happiness: The Virtue of Consumption and the Consumption of Virtue", *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49.4 (2010): 291-2.

⁷¹ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 61.

⁷² Rodney Clapp, "Why the Devil Takes Visa: A Christian Response to the Triumph of Consumerism", *Christianity Today* 40.11 (1996): 17-33.

⁷³ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 99.

⁷⁴ Klein, *No Logo*, 4; Yves de Maeseneer, "'I Had Barbie in My Brain' (Naomi Klein)", in *Desirable God?: Our Fascination with Images, Idols, and New Deities*, eds. Roger Burggraeve, et al. (Bondgenotenlaan: Peeters Publishers, 2003), 246.

chrome and blond wood, it is a temple, where the swoosh is worshiped as both art and heroic symbol.⁷⁵

On the ‘tails’ side of the *theopolitical* coin, consumer politics, first fosters an ignorance and indifference as to the originating context of the products we consume. We objectify and evaluate things apart from any consideration of the chain of production.⁷⁶ Consumers don’t need to know or care about where the raw materials of their products came from, just whether or not they want it enough to buy it.⁷⁷

Second, consumer politics commodify the bodies and souls of humans (cf. Rev. 18:13!). Bauman speaks of “the ‘collateral victims’ of consumerism: the excluded, the outcasts, the underclass.”⁷⁸ Despite the vigilance of the powers-at-be to keep them well hidden from their *ekklesia*, consumer culture has hideous consequences. Suffering bodies lie scattered behind the spiritualised brands.⁷⁹

Despite the rhetoric and narrative of ‘freedom’ told through advertising, the underbelly of the beast reveals a very real slavery; both of the minority-world consumers in the West and the majority-world factory workers in the Rest.⁸⁰ In the West, low-income families become the outcasts; unable to keep up with the current version of the ‘style pack’. This frustration all too often fuels outbursts of crime, such as the recent London riots.⁸¹ For the Rest, desire for the cheapest prices, maximum profit (and dividends to shareholders), equates to an ever-decreasing pay for materials and labour – locking them into a downward spiral of poverty, desperation – and death.⁸²

MODERN COMPROMISE: A CHURCH OF CONSUMERS

If consumer culture commodifies elements of culture, then the Consumer Church is the result of a commodification of the elements of the Christian faith. This section will

⁷⁵ Klein, *No Logo*, 56.

⁷⁶ For example, a French play apart from appreciation of French culture or history; see Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 71-2.

⁷⁷ Makant, “The Pursuit of Happiness”, 292.

⁷⁸ Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 143, 122-24.

⁷⁹ de Maeseneer, “‘I Had Barbie in My Brain’ (Naomi Klein)”, 250.

⁸⁰ Klein, *No Logo*, 195-229.

⁸¹ See Zygmunt Bauman, “The London Riots – On Consumerism coming Home to Roost”, *Social Europe Journal* (09/08/2011), <http://www.social-europe.eu/2011/08/the-london-riots-on-consumerism-coming-home-to-roost/> (accessed 1 Nov 2011).

⁸² Klein, *No Logo*, 195-229.

describe how Western Christians have allowed consumer culture to commodify Christian desire, belonging and identity – resulting in a theopolitics of compromise.

COMPROMISED DESIRE

Consumer Church, like consumer culture, plays upon our desires. The difference is that the products sold are commodified aspects of Christian faith.⁸³ The 'Christian Resource' industry offers a host of such products and freebies: sermon podcasts, leadership programmes, customised Bibles, and 'Christian Living' books & DVD's.⁸⁴ Spiritualised consumer desire for 'more' teaching, devotionals, or worship experiences 'now' keep suppliers busy and profitable. Just as material products are sold to material consumers in 'pursuit of happiness', so spiritual products are sold to spiritual consumers in pursuit of 'God', 'growth', 'success', or 'blessing'.⁸⁵ The result is that believers have a crippling and addictive dependency upon and never-ending desire for 'more' resources (which is, of course, very good for sales).⁸⁶ They search Christian catalogues *thinking that in them they have life* (John 5:39).

Harper and Metzger lament that "worship forms are focused on meeting people's "felt needs.""⁸⁷ These 'felt needs' "have been defined for them by a consumer culture that generally urges them to focus on self-fulfillment."⁸⁸ This equates to a commodification of *God*. 'Worship' moves from being a *verb* describing acts of praise, to a *noun* describing a 'thing' to be enjoyed. Just as consumer culture separates consumers from the originating contexts of the products consumed, so Consumer Church separates doctrine from the context from which it came: scripture and Church history.⁸⁹

⁸³ Graham Ward, "The Commodification of Religion or the Consummation of Capitalism", in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

⁸⁴ See Jason Clark, "Consumer Liturgies and Their Corrosive Effects on Christian Identity", in *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What's Emerging*, eds. Scot McKnight, et al. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 55.

⁸⁵ Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 77-81.

⁸⁶ See Nigel Scotland, "Shopping for a Church: Consumerism and the Churches", in *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*, eds. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 141-2.

⁸⁷ Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 117.

⁸⁸ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 117.

⁸⁹ Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 185-6.

COMPROMISED COMMUNITY

Just as consumers 'invest' in their membership in the Society of Consumers through consumption, so also Consumer Christians 'store up treasure' in commodified versions of the Kingdom of God. One particularly commodified case is 'homogeneous' Church Growth: study groups for singles, age-targeted services, etc. The principle of homogeneity is a formula for instant growth; albeit with the side-effects of excluding other nationalities, races, ages and 'worship styles' – thus dividing the body of Christ.⁹⁰

Another case of the commodification of community is certain expressions of the 'Emergent Church'. Pete Ward's *Liquid Church* picks up Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity', and argues for a 'liquefied' (less structured, formal, etc.) church, to connect with liquid culture.⁹¹ For example, Ward proposes that a liquid church would "evolve around what people find interesting, attractive, and compelling."⁹² Kees de Groot writes "It is hard to imagine that anyone reading Zygmunt Bauman's almost gloomy picture of liquid modernity would ever become inspired to promote the notion of liquid church."⁹³ He argues that Ward has skipped from the 'is' of Bauman's description of culture, to an 'ought' of his prescription for the Church, without a much needed critique of 'liquid' culture.⁹⁴

COMPROMISED IDENTITY

As consumer culture tells an inviting story of progression from 'unfreedom' to autonomy, so Consumer Church invites consumers to be liberated from unsatisfying church experiences.⁹⁵ Consumer Church, commodifies God-given desire for freedom, conforming it to a worldly 'freedom' that is not only freedom without attachment, but *from* attachment.⁹⁶ We organise our lives around cultural consumer narratives, and relegate "Christianity and

⁹⁰ See discussion in Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 55-58. It is worth noting (and celebrating) that Bill Hybels and the Willow Creek leadership have rejected this principle as unbiblical and divisive, and now strive to be multi-ethnic.

⁹¹ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

⁹² Ward, *Liquid Church*, 89ff.

⁹³ Kees de Groot, "The Church in Liquid Modernity: A Sociological and Theological Exploration of a Liquid Church." *International Journal for the study of the Christian Church* 6.1 (2006): 95.

⁹⁴ de Groot, "The Church in Liquid Modernity", 94-95; See also Andrew Picard, "Be the Community: Baptist Ecclesiology in the Context of Missional Church", *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 5.1 (2009): 40, 44-49.

⁹⁵ Clark, "Consumer Liturgies", 43; William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1-32.

⁹⁶ Makant, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 291.

church to a mere supplement, a cultural accessory” which we deem ourselves free to partake of – if no other more appealing options present themselves.⁹⁷

Tidball picks up on Bauman’s language of the ‘tourist’, which aptly summarises the identity caused by such seductive notions of ‘freedom.’⁹⁸ The tourist strolls through life in holiday mode, staying in a place so long as it is enjoyable, then moving on.

“Work, no less than holidays, has to be approached with the mentality of the tourist and must produce the constant stream of excitements and satisfaction which the tourist derives from travelling, or else it will not be tolerated. Tourism’s lifestyle is seductive.”⁹⁹

The Christian Tourist stays ‘free’ of attachments, keeping their options perennially open to the best experience, church service, teaching, or event.

COMPROMISED THEOPOLITICS

Consumer Church has a compromised *theopolitics* that reflects the idolatrous commodifying structures of consumer culture. On the ‘heads’ side of the *theopolitical* coin, Consumer Church operates with a kind of Pelagian and anthropocentric ‘vending machine’ theology: spiritual consumers get what they pay for. The Church, too, gets what it works for: rather than trusting the Lord of the Church to build His Church, Christians imagine themselves bearing sole responsibility for growing it.¹⁰⁰

On the ‘tails’ side of the coin, believers become increasingly dependent on and affectionate of ‘Christian’ idols, while the world becomes increasingly uninfluenced by the kingdom of God. The ‘gods’ of the Christian market enslave Christian consumers to the pursuit of spiritual goods. Consumer Christians are seduced away from the task of being an *alternative community*, settling for allegiances with consumer-driven lifestyle, consumer-driven Christianity, and consumer-driven politics. Their desire for God has been commodified, and they unwittingly become servants of Mammon.

⁹⁷ Clark, “Consumer Liturgies”, 43.

⁹⁸ Derek Tidball, “The Pilgrim and the Tourist: Zygmunt Bauman and Postmodern Identity” in *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, eds. Craig Bartholomew and Fred Hughes (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

⁹⁹ Tidball, “The Pilgrim and the Tourist”, 189.

¹⁰⁰ See the critique offered by Picard, “Be the Community”, 62-63.

MODERN CALLING: THE ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY

As the 1st century believers were called to come out of their collusion with Babylon, so too Consumer Christians are called out to come out of consumer culture. But what would this look like? The proposal below will outline a positive vision for the alternative desire, belonging, identity and *theopolitics* of a truly *alternative community*. In a world of Babylon, we must be the community of New Jerusalem.¹⁰¹

ALTERNATIVE DESIRE

In a culture of commodified desire, the Church is to be a community of *contentment* in Christ. Desiring ourselves and the 'collateral victims' *to death* is tolerated in Babylon, but New Jerusalem protects life and peace for itself and the nations by excluding such abominations (21:27). In a carrot-stick world of perpetually unsatisfying consumer desire, we do well to remember Augustine's prayer: our hearts are restless until they rest in God.¹⁰²

The good gift of desire draws us toward our created end: *God*.¹⁰³ Makant recalls the Thomistic understanding of our *telos* as 'friendship with God'.¹⁰⁴ Further, she picks up on his emphasis that this 'friendship' is a sheer gift of grace.¹⁰⁵ In the Shadow of Modern Babylon, endlessly enslaved in the 'pursuit of happiness', the Bride shines the quiet light of satisfaction and freedom in the One who pursued and bought friendship with her. "And whoever *desires*, let him take of the water of life *freely*." (22:17)

In the light of this kind of grace, praise and worship, through whatever means, is far from a product to be consumed. Rae observes that Christians gathered for worship are *invited* to join in a song that is not their own, but the song of heaven (Isaiah 6:3 & Revelation 19:1-7).¹⁰⁶ Just as our desire for God has both its end and source in God, so too our worship of God starts and ends with God, as opposed to our 'felt needs'.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ The language employed (here and below) is from Goheen, *A Light To The Nations*, 208-211.

¹⁰² Quoted in Makant, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 291.

¹⁰³ Makant, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 295.

¹⁰⁴ Makant, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 296.

¹⁰⁵ Makant, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 296.

¹⁰⁶ Murray Rae, *The Liturgical Shape of Christian Life, Inaugural Lecture*, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, 2008.

http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/sites/default/files/knox_centre/09_Liturgical_shape_of_christian_life.pdf, (accessed 31, October, 2011), 8.

¹⁰⁷ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 117.

ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY

In a world of consumer community, the Church is to be a community of *koinonia*. Imaginary membership in 'weightless' branded communities, is to be subverted by deep sharing – 'deep church'.¹⁰⁸ In the consumer world, corporate logos unify homogeneous, co-customers into invisible community; the Church and Spirit welcome all who hear, thirst and desire to 'come' and share in the blessings of genuine community. The commodified 'in and up' world seeks to bring *in* the consumers, and raise *up* the economic growth. The cruciform 'down and out' Church gratefully receives God's *downward* blessing, and takes it *out* to the 'collateral victims' on the margins of life.

In light of this, the communal act of sharing the Eucharist (or Communion / 'Lord's Supper') together becomes an opportunity to enact the resistance of the homogenising pressures of consumerism.¹⁰⁹ We freely share a meal that Jesus first freely shared with us. "To consume the Eucharist is an act of anticonsumption, for here to consume is to be consumed, to be taken up into participation in something larger than the self."¹¹⁰ Likewise, baptism, far from being an entertaining or merely iconic display of devotion, joins us ontologically to a believing community, which we contribute to and are nourished within.¹¹¹

ALTERNATIVE IDENTITY

In a world of enslaved tourists, the Church is to be a community of liberated pilgrims.¹¹² The seductive and illusory myth of 'freedom' from attachments needs a prophetic *apokalupsis* to show it up as the enslaving trap that it is. Freedom from community is slavery to individualism. Clark writes that while it may be "a time when the most "authentic" thing to do seems to be to abandon faith and leave church, we need to rediscover the implications for Christian identity of being an active part of a community."¹¹³

Here again, the subversive Sacraments of the alternative community, Eucharist and Baptism, are formative to a Christ-centred identity. We, not 'I', feast upon (Eucharist) and are united to (Baptism) Christ, in which we find a new, secure, and unchanging identity. We

¹⁰⁸ Clark, "Consumer Liturgies", 56-7.

¹⁰⁹ Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 123ff.

¹¹⁰ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 84.

¹¹¹ Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*, 249; Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 119; Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 132-33.

¹¹² Tidball, "The Pilgrim and the Tourist".

¹¹³ Clark, "Consumer Liturgies", 57.

are no more 'free' to opt out of this spiritual provision, than we are of needing physical food, water or shelter.

ALTERNATIVE THEOPOLITICS

In a world of Consumer theopolitics, the Church must be a community of *alternative theopolitics*. We must move from idolatrous complicity to worshipful resistance. All 'Caesars' must be denied worship – in the world and in the Church, in word and deed.

HEADS: From Idolatry to Worship

On the 'heads' side of the *theopolitical* coin, 'coming out of Babylon' is to move from idolatry to worship – from heterodoxy to orthodoxy. Worship is a *theopolitical* action. It "proclaims an ultimate allegiance."¹¹⁴ Moving from *idolatry* to *worship* will mean an eye-opening awareness of the influence and appeal of competing allegiances upon us (whether national, commercial or 'Christian').¹¹⁵

The challenge for Church worship is to craft liturgy (all forms of worship) in such a way that as much as possible, it achieves *both* authentic engagement with God, *and* is communicable to the worshippers.¹¹⁶ Serving God in spirit and truth is first priority – crafting a creative church service is secondary.¹¹⁷ Worship that is truly orthodox will be necessarily *subversive* (of idols) and *prophetic* (countering idolatry), and will thus also be far more *disturbing and dangerous* than much popular worship.

TAILS: From Collusion to Resistance

On the 'tails' side of the coin, 'coming out of Babylon' is to move from *collusion* to *resistance*. If every theology has political implications – every politics (and every economics) implies a theology. "There is an implicit anthropology and an implicit theology in every economics."¹¹⁸ The orthodox and prophetic worship above must be accompanied by political *advocacy* and *action*. Tails must follow from heads.

First, we must **advocate for economic justice**. Locally, nationally and globally, the Church is to act as a 'nation of priests' to intercede for good.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*, 190-1

¹¹⁵ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 187.

¹¹⁶ See conclusions of Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 120.

¹¹⁷ Rae, *The Liturgical Shape of Christian Life*, 4, 16.

¹¹⁸ Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 60.

¹¹⁹ See the helpful proposals for faithful political witness at local, national and global levels by Luke Bretherton, *Christianity & Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

- *Locally*, this could mean anything from speaking out against joining or starting a community group ('Christian' or not) to oppose the expansion of a shopping mall.¹²⁰
- *Nationally*, this could mean engaging in difficult work of shaping policy on public health care, or even protesting the unjust practices of Insurance Corporations.¹²¹
- *Globally*, faithful advocacy can take the form of everything from supporting Fair Trade, to speaking out against unjust decisions and practices of national governments and multi-national organisations.¹²²

Some advocacy will be in response to events and will need varying degrees of urgency, but an *alternative community* will be intentional and engaged at all times.¹²³

Second, we must **act for economic justice**. As individuals and organisations, our actions must correspond to our advocacy. Being a community of *contentment in Christ* means we must be characterised less and less by the *porneia* of Babylon and more and more by *koinonia* of New Jerusalem. The disciplines of Simplicity, Sharing and Stewardship are essential.

- The discipline of *simplicity* ensures that our desires are 'rooted in Jesus Christ', and have not been commodified.¹²⁴ This 'disobedience' to consumer culture could look like the 'slow-food' movement (opposing the 'nowism' of fast-food).¹²⁵
- The discipline of *sharing* 'disobeys' consumer culture by showing that we aren't owned by the things we own. This disobedience will look like sharing everything from a tea-bag to a garden with your community.
- The discipline of *stewardship* refuses to commodify or objectify creation into products we know nothing about. An example of this 'disobedience' would be to insist on knowing the originating context of what you buy.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ For an example from New Zealand: the St. Luke's Community Association, "<http://www.saveourcommunity.org.nz/about-us.html>, (accessed 26, October, 2010).

¹²¹ See other examples in Bretherton, *Christianity & Contemporary Politics*, 126-60.

¹²² Bretherton, *Christianity & Contemporary Politics*, 175-99.

¹²³ It is not clear to me, at this early stage, how productive the "Occupy Wall Street" movement will be, but it is the sort of thing that Christians could discerningly engage in. See Occupy Wall Street, <http://occupywallst.org/>, (accessed 3 November 2011).

¹²⁴ Daniel Izuzquiza, *Rooted in Jesus Christ: Toward a Radical Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 85.

¹²⁵ See Slow Food International, <http://www.slowfood.com/>, (accessed 3 November 2011).

¹²⁶ Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 71-2.

CONCLUSION

This essay has sought to answer the question: *How can the Modern Church be an alternative community in the midst of consumptive culture?* In the Biblical Ecclesiology section, we considered the ancient **context** in which John's apocalypse contrasts the harlot Babylon and the bride New Jerusalem, and took special note of the diametrically opposite economic character. We saw the evidence of **compromise**, as some of the 1st century church participated in the economic structures (i.e. trade guilds), and benefitted richly from its profit. We then noted the **calling** to be an *eschatological* and *theopolitical* church, having a posture and practice of faithful resistance in the shadow of empire.

In the Contemporary Ecclesiology section, we noted the cultural **context** of consumer culture, observing how its stories and values infect our desires, sense of belonging, and identity, resulting in a consumer '*theopolitics*'. We then considered the **compromise** of the Modern Church with consumer culture. Finally, we considered what an alternative **calling** to an alternative theopolitics might look like.

In every context it occupies, the *alternative theopolitical* community, the Church, must first discern where Babylon exists (even within the Church), then 'come out' of it, and finally subvert it with faithful resistance. Flemming writes:

"Rome was not the only actor to play Babylon's part. Babylon and her sins are recast in new roles again and again in human history, including on our own world stage. Wherever governments or global conglomerates fill their own coffers at the expense of powerless people; wherever political or commercial empires behave in ways that demand idolatrous allegiance; wherever nations use military, economic, or political coercion as a tool of self-serving policies; wherever societies or individuals embrace an ethos of greedy consumption – there is Babylon reborn."¹²⁷

This essay has argued that the Church, as a genuinely *alternative theopolitical community* must demonstrate its union to Christ by Christ-centred desire, community, and identity. She must be a *prophetic worshipping* community, exalting Christ above all idols; and a community of *political resistance* urging and modelling an economy of genuine freedom.

¹²⁷ Flemming, "On Earth as It Is in Heaven", 360.

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