

Critical Loyalty: Tapping the Prophetic Tone of *Consuming Jesus*

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One of the highest compliments I know to pay a book is to describe it as provocative. In fact, like Franz Kafka, I often have to ask why we should read at all “if the book we are reading doesn’t shake us awake like a blow on the skull.”¹ I mean, I don’t know about your world, but there are quite enough status-quo lullabies in mine. There are hordes of tantalizing, titillating powers that vie to arrest me with comfort and songs of security and to brush my ear with reminding whispers of my right to remain silent.

But in Christ—by the blessed Puddleglum of grace²—what I crave is exhortation. What I pray for is to be led to the rock that is higher than I (Psalm 61: 2).³ Who, after all, truly cares for truth and doesn’t feel the conviction of error or apathy or ignorance as a blessed thrill? Who has learned to pray “to You as You know Yourself to be”⁴ or “not my will but Your will be done” (Luke 22:42) and does not intimately feel how “an honest answer is like a kiss on the lips” (Proverbs 24:26)? So I cannot help agreeing with John Perkins in proclaiming that, in its provocative power, Dr. Metzger’s “*Consuming Jesus* is a powerful book.”⁵

A lot can be said about the reasons for the book’s power. But, to its credit, most of these points are self-evident. Just read it. Its concise historical framing of the evangelical movement is alone worth its purchase and study. The de facto segregation it highlights in the evangelical church is a mother-load of potentially fruitful conviction and action. And given that it stands as an introduction to a movement of people pressing

¹ I owe this quotation to James W. Sire’s *The Habits of the Mind* (Madison, WI: IVP, 2000), 174.

² From the end of C.S. Lewis’s *The Silver Chair*, Puddleglum’s heroic stomping in the Green Witch’s soporific fire is an image every Christian would be well-served to remember.

³ I may be stretching the image too much, using it as symbol for the objective vantage of God’s revealed will, and not simply one of safety and refuge.

⁴ A prayer C.S. Lewis somewhere recalls, which he took from the unknown authored medieval work, *The Book of Privy Counsel*.

⁵ John M. Perkins from Afterwards, Paul Louis Metzger’s *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Division in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 173.

forward in Christ to manifest a theology of love in the down-to-earth actions that alone make that theology joyfully complete—it should be hard to imagine how conviction fans like Kafka and myself could fail to love this book.

But upon first read I did not love *Consuming Jesus*. It did not sit well. It did not satisfy. It did not seem nearly provocative enough.

An analogy might help explain why.

Have you ever been asked by a friend for advice, given that advice with prayerful care, watched it recklessly ignored, and then had your friend come back—often several years of scars and scarring later—to happily share a “personal revelation” of what amounted to the advice you had given them long before? If so, you probably know the temptation to indignation and pride such scenarios can inspire. “I told you so” is a powerful emotion—and a fine gateway to conversations near the heart of the gospel—but rather than unpack the theological and psychological implications of such emotions, I want to explore specifically why *Consuming Jesus* inspired them in me, and then what my findings might mean for the conversation and movement at large.

My life in Christ has always had at its center the vision of trans-racial worship that closes *Consuming Jesus*. From the beginning, as a senior in high school, such a vision struck me as an unavoidable point and unmistakable culmination in God’s story. From His promise to Abraham (Genesis 12), to the prophesies of Isaiah (especially 53 onward), to the direct implications of both the Great Commission (Matthew 28) and the Pentecost scene of Acts 2, to the descriptive terms of Revelation 5: I have been unable to read the Bible without being reminded to get used to the idea that I will soon be a minority for the incomparable majority of my life in Christ.⁶ In the same vein, I struggle to remember a time when I didn’t believe that the church this side of the consummated kingdom is to practice that kingdom’s consummated presence now. That is to say, in the language of *Consuming Jesus*, that if God’s revelation of heaven involves a family of worshippers who transcend race and class, I had better start praying for that sort of thing to come on earth—and to begin seeking how to enact and become my own prayer.

⁶ My campus pastor used to point out that, based on historical estimates of Christian confession, white Europeans trail Asians and Africans by a long shot. Let the statisticians and historians discuss.

I believe these two perspectives, united, helped form my tepid initial response to *Consuming Jesus*. It is easy to imagine why. If you believe God's desire for a culturally and ethnically diverse family, integrated in Christ, is obvious—and that the as-yet-to-come culminated kingdom is, in God's time and way, even now culminating in, through, and around us by His Spirit—then a book arguing that we get over our narcissisms and out of comfort zones and into the hurting world seems a lot like that frustrating friend who comes back bubbling about the exciting “new idea” you have been writing to them for years in your own sweat and blood.

But a reminder: up to this point I have not been commenting on Dr. Metzger's book so much as on my own beliefs and how they may have led to my initial reaction to *Consuming Jesus*. Now, because I know many people in the evangelical church (especially people thirty and younger) who share the formative beliefs I've described, and because I can imagine them responding with an exasperated string of *Duh!*'s after reading the book, and because, in the end, I want to help them understand why I believe Dr. Perkins is correct in calling it “more than a book,”⁷ I would like to point out the implicit prophetic edge to be found in Dr. Metzger's tone.

As a socio-theological work set in the context laid out in its first chapter, *Consuming Jesus* is an overtly prophetic book. Its articulations have the power to reawaken the larger evangelical church to what it can be, what it should be, and, in Christ, what it is. What is more, the specific movement it represents—and in many ways serves as a practical connection to—provides the evangelical church with a variety of resources that can help it escape the miry entanglements of a consumerism-infected approach to living out the gospel. We are not called to market affinity groups any more than we are called to form the church around them; we are called to Christ, and to anyone broken enough to accept the foolishness of His gospel (a pithy summary of 1st Corinthians). Such prophetic dimensions, however, while the express subject of the book, do not form the cutting edge of Metzger's work. *That* razor, for many of us, abides (or hides) in his implicit tone of critical loyalty.

This point jabbed me when I went to Powell's City of Books for a public reading. Both in his presentation and during the Q&A that followed, I noticed how Dr. Metzger

⁷ Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 173.

stressed his loyalty to the evangelical movement. “It’s *my* movement,” I recall him saying, emphatically. And when a few times audience members landed what seemed to be scorching criticisms of the movement, Dr. Metzger appeared to simply embrace the flames. A grave nod, a sorrowful apology, a pledge that he wouldn’t just jump ship—but never the disavowing or distancing so many of us are tempted by. His demeanor remained one of staunch loyalty to a movement with which he obviously had passionate disagreements—just like in his book. The significance of its subtitle suddenly struck me: *Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church*. Beyond race and class divisions? Yes, of course; that is obviously gospel. But in a consumer church?

Why? Why the conjunction? Why the loyalty?

Why hang on to structures and traditions and discourses so weighed down and conflated with run-rampant consumerism, seventeenth century deist political theology, dilapidated sociological knowledge, and a smorgasbord of kitsch? Why wait around coaxing evangelicals out of the suburbs when, meanwhile, people God loves are dying in the ghettos? Why this gradualism? Why not bless the crabwise movement and leave it to its own affinity-based pace?

The implicit ability of *Consuming Jesus* to stir up these cutting questions, in my view, is its sharpest prophetic edge. That is because those of us who are most likely to embrace Metzger’s vision and strive to implement it now—the new wineskins who are ready for the new wine—are also most likely to balk at his implicit loyalty to the consumer-steeped evangelical movement. Forget for a moment the pesky paradox that, for many of us, it is this same movement that has raised us well enough to criticize it soundly at all. Instead (in fear and trembling),⁸ consider what good might come from asking for an articulation of why the evangelical movement is not, by and large, dead weight. Why is it not simply a heavy yoke to someone who wants to get about the pressing business of figuring out what it means to live the “whole gospel”? What power or dignity or worth is there in living under the shadow of associations with kindly-but-

⁸ I read Paul’s use of “fear and trembling” in Philippians 2 as directly related to how we foster unity in the church; in light of such a reading, then, any criticism of the church should be undertaken with utmost care. For a pithy and memorably forceful theological reinforcement of such caution, see the opening chapters of Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*.

impotent Ned Flanders, jockeying special interest groups, and those ubiquitous/insidious health-and-wealth charlatans?

There are deep theological bases for asking such searching questions of the evangelical movement. My own top-of-the-not-too-topped-head survey dredges up enough material for a book in itself. There is God to Moses after the Golden Calf: “Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against (Israel) and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation” (Exodus 22). There is Noah’s similar situation before that (Genesis 7). Then there is Jesus advising his disciples, when spurned by an Israelite town, to shake that town’s dust off their feet (Matthew 10:14). There is, of course, fiery Paul’s rebuke to the Jewish community in Antioch (Acts 13). But to mention these examples is not to draw any easy connections with the situation linked above; rather, it is simply to suggest that there may well be more than prideful immaturity at work behind my desire to hear a loyalty like Metzger’s given articulate defense.

Thankfully, in answer to these legitimate critical questions, and as simultaneous crucible to the immature pride that is likely mixed in, Christian history is ripe with thinking that involves the idea I have labeled “critical loyalty.” In many ways, Christian history *is* a history of critical loyalty. To get a feel for the idea, simply do a survey of the Bible. Start with God pursuing us at all; go back to Moses bailing out the Israelites, or Jesus preaching the Gospel to Israel before the Gentiles, or Paul coming close to his mind-boggling willingness to exchange his own place in heaven for that of his beloved Israel (Romans 9:3). Or consider the history of the church. Study the Monastic movement; study many of the martyrs; study Luther and the Reformers; study our civil rights movement or the struggles of theologians in the Pentecostal movement to retain its good insights without succumbing to acceptance of its blind-alleys.⁹

Consider these examples because in them the same paradox shines through: in each we see a devoted loyalty to a certain people, but a loyalty that expresses itself through an active commitment to see that people radically changed. Critical loyalty, then, stands for a dynamic (and often seemingly dicey) way of relating, one that simultaneously strives to preserve and yet altar, to protect and yet expose, to affirm and

⁹ Here I’m thinking of a personal hero in the faith, Gordon Fee, and his “Critical Loyalty,” *Agora* 1.2 (Fall 1977), 10-11.

yet redeem. And while we can learn about critical loyalty in profound ways from the intravenous implications found in the life of a John Perkins or the theological reminders of a *Consuming Jesus*, we can further the prophetic call of living beyond race and class divisions by learning to articulate why and how that calling may be inextricable from our calling to continue loving (and standing with) the lurching vehicle of evangelicalism that got us here.¹⁰

For many, like me, the fallen powers of the consumer-matrix have gone too far. Like other oppressive powers before them, they have become overextended and overexposed. Like Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Hitler (and, yes, Sauron), the voraciousness of their own greed has done them in. Many of us, thankfully, have eaten enough Turkish Delights by now; we know in our bones we were made for more than gobbling mere affinity's smooth relational sweets. So I share with you my own hope and vision, my own version of Ezekiel's pronouncement to the dry bones:

We've had enough. Our bellies ache. We've come to a Rubicon of grace at which nothing sounds better than vomiting. We are ready—even eager—to be led beyond consumer community, the Procrustean bed of affinity groups, of “godly comfort,” of race and class divisions. We are ready to know, in the quality demanded by relational difference and inconvenient experience, what Paul means by “the riches of the glorious inheritance in the saints” (Ephesians 1: 18). We are ready, and yet we yearn to press on without feeling as though our larger evangelical family got left behind.

But, ironically, those of us who are gagging on the consumer mindset applied to church have also been formed by it to mistrust brand loyalty. And loyalty to the evangelical movement, without patient explanation, initially sounds like little more than good old-fashioned loyalty to a brand.¹¹ It appears to pander to familial instinct. It rings of mere clannishness. That evangelical churches often plan and pray based on models of brand marketing does not make overcoming these associations any easier. But easy is

¹⁰ I am heartened by the example of evangelical Gordon College, which has started a foundation for Critical Loyalty that will investigate the most pervasive and legitimate critiques of the evangelical church.

¹¹ See Djupe, Paul A. “Religious Brand Loyalty and Political Loyalties.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (March 2000), 78-89.

rarely God's style; redemption, on the other hand, always is. So my heart is with Dr. Metzger; I am strengthened by his loyal but critical tone.

I believe, following his first chapter's description of the church's predicament, that evangelicals have been blinded by danger-fraught navigations through tough historical choices—and not, as secular critics would most likely explain it, through the designs of a stealthy, Nietzschean will-to-power.¹² If some of us, then, presume to have glimpsed ways out of the consumerist cul-de-sac, we had best go back in love and share our vision. How our brothers and sisters will respond to that vision, only prayerful time will tell. Meanwhile, *Consuming Jesus* has exhorted me to think anew about what it means to call the evangelical movement my own. As I wrestle with the issue, I pray for resources and conversations that will encourage us with an understanding of the limits, pitfalls, and the prophetic power of critical loyalty. May gracious provocation—and through it our realized community in Christ—continue to deepen and expand.

¹² More than ever, Metzger's historicized accounts of the church's blindness must face a wide backdrop of critiques like Nietzsche's, which suggest that, given the church's collusions with consumerism, its commitment to altruism and diversity can most often best be described as a rhetorical smokescreen for its own selfish, exclusionary agendas.

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