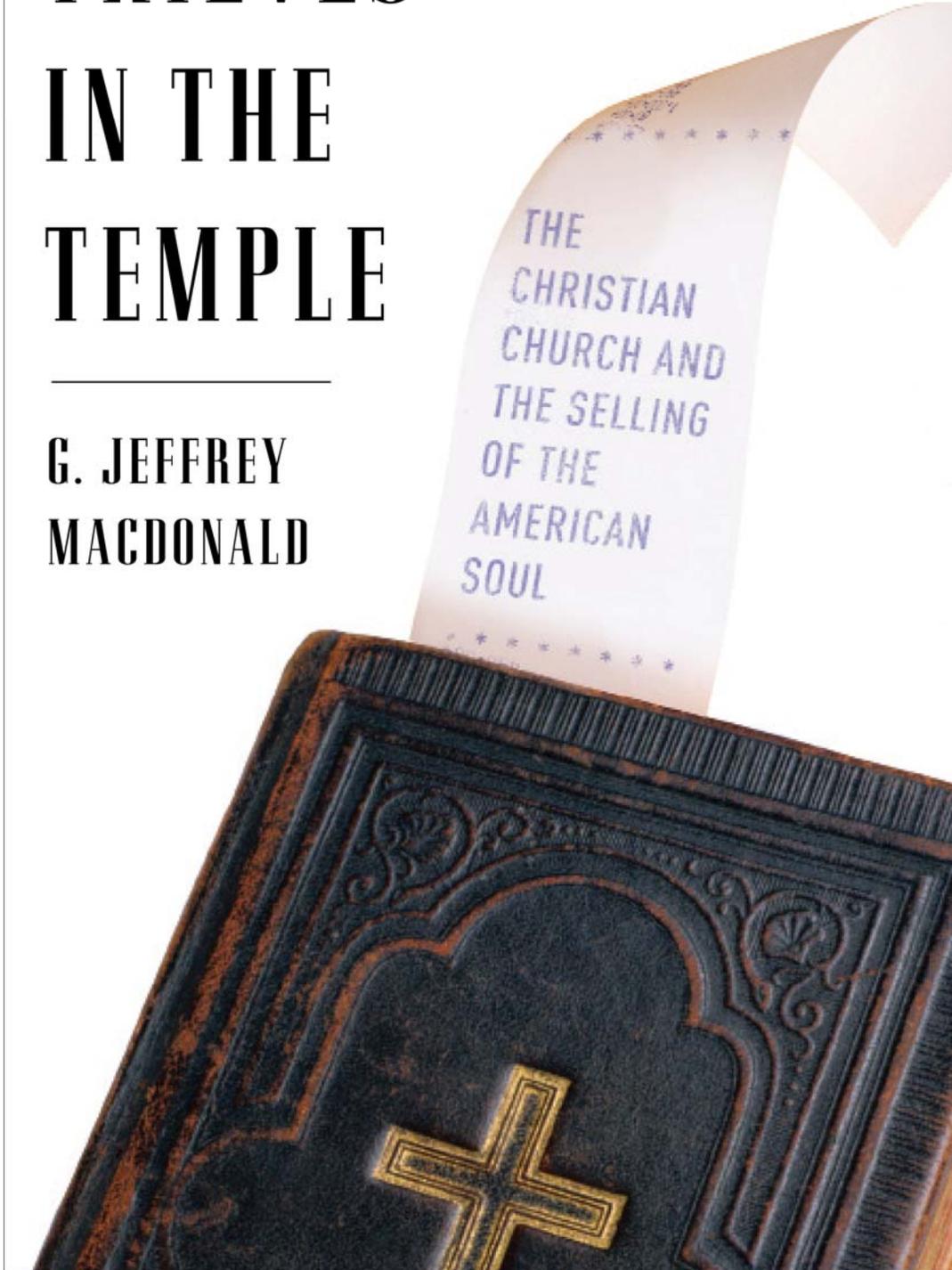


THIEVES IN THE TEMPLE

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STUDY GUIDE FOR

Thieves in the Temple:

The Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul (Basic Books, 2010)

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald

Study Guide by Dylan Klempner and G. Jeffrey MacDonald

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Preface to the Study Guide
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When people read *Thieves in the Temple: The Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul* (Basic Books, 2010), they tend to want to talk about it. They're engaged by the thesis, which holds that a growing, consumerist approach to religion is stripping American congregations of tools for shaping moral character. They're concerned when they read jarring statistics: more than 70 percent of students in religious high schools admit to cheating; 75 percent of clergy are overweight or obese; millions of Christians need help from credit counselors to manage consequences of overspending. Perhaps more importantly, they want to talk about the hopeful case studies in which churchgoers use their consumer clout to be challenged for the better.

This study guide aims to meet those needs. It's designed to facilitate conversations among churchgoers who have read *Thieves in the Temple* or are in the process of reading it. Some group leaders might find it a useful launching pad for drafting their own set of questions. Others might read each bullet point and each question aloud verbatim when groups gather and see where the conversation leads. There is no single right way to use it. As long as readers are grappling with the impacts of religious consumerism and learning how to demand meaningful challenge from their religious institutions, the goal is being accomplished.

Leaders will find sections in this guide follow a basic structure. The guide highlights germane verses and passages from scripture, as well as key statistics and key points of each chapter. Questions are formulated to help participants recall the author's argument and explore possible applications. Each of the six chapters ends with action steps for group members to pursue between meetings. If taken to heart, this sequence of reading, discussing and acting can help foster the very virtues and habits of the heart that have tragically been receding from Christian life in America. We hope you find it useful and edifying.

Since this resource is offered electronically, it will be easy to modify and improve over time. For that project, we'd appreciate your feedback. If you find certain sections work well or could work better, please send Jeff a note through his website at www.gjeffreymacdonald.com.

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INTRODUCTION

Scripture:

- Matthew 21:13

Some key statistics and points:

- Religious mobility has become a way of life in America. In 1955, only 4 percent of Americans had switched religious affiliations in their lifetime. By 1985, it was one in three. By 2008 the number had reached a whopping 44 percent. (xi)
- The Church's present crisis reflects a rare moment in Scripture where Jesus shows anger. After he finds that the temple in Jerusalem has become a marketplace, he overturns the money changer's tables and invokes the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah: "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of thieves.'" (xv)
- If the Church fails to instill lofty values in Christians, no other institution on the American cultural landscape will fill the gap. In the most important project of all—that is, stretching individuals to care deeply about the highest things—the Church is on its own. If the Church becomes unable to do that job, there will be no large institutions in American society capable of shaping good people from one generation to the next (xiv-xv)

Discussing the argument:

- 1) Despite his apparent success, the Community Church of Joy's senior pastor, Walt Kallestad was having difficulty sleeping. Why? (p. ix)
- 2) In a tearful sermon, Kallestad said that on his watch the church had become a "dispenser of religious goods and services." What did he mean? (p. x)
- 3) "Faith has become a consumer commodity in America." What does the author mean by this statement? Do you agree with him? Why or why not? (p. xi)
- 4) What changes did Kallestad and his congregants make? What did it cost them? (pp. x-xi)
- 5) How do you think the author's experiences as a minister impact his views? (pp. xii-xiii)

Bringing the message home:

- 1) MacDonald argues that the Church's core purpose is to facilitate the saving of souls, which he describes as the elevation and transformation of desires. A few questions:
 - *Let's think a moment about how we use our resources (time, energy & money) in church life and in our families. What have we apparently come to value more deeply over the past year?
 - *What have we come to value less?
 - *Do our actions demonstrate that we're making progress in terms of bringing our priorities into alignment with God's? Give specific examples.
- 2) How might we do better in fulfilling this core mission of seeing souls saved through elevated desires and deeper commitments to God's values? (p. xiv)

- 3) What was the result of Jesus' words and actions in the temple? How might Jesus react if He walked into our church on a typical Sunday? (p. xv)
- 4) Does our church help members to cultivate passion for highest things? Or are we more focused on satisfying desires than seeing them transformed? (p. xvi)

CHAPTER 1: THE RISE OF THE CONSUMER DRIVEN CHURCH

Scripture

- Luke 9:58
- Mark 10:17-25
- Matthew 24:9

Some key statistics and points:

- The percentage of Americans who self-identified as church members climbed from 49 in 1940 to 62 in 1956. Sunday-school attendance figures blossomed from 25 million in 1945 to 39 million in 1956. (p. 14)
- In the 1960s, Religious consumerism became more individualistic as Americans reexamined what role, if any, church life should play in their spiritual pursuits. Americans, particularly young adults, embarked on journeys of spiritual self-discovery, dabbling in world religions. Eastern religious practices enjoyed a sudden wave of popularity. Denominations, committed to ecumenism, played down their differences and blessed the crossing of denominational lines. Clergy began presenting themselves not so much as authorities but rather as companions for the journey, wherever that might lead (pp. 15-18).
- By the 1990s, churchgoers felt emboldened to shop for the right "fit" – one that stood to satisfy items on their wish lists – when choosing a church (p. 20).

Discussing the argument:

- 1) A. R. Bernard, CEO of the 120,000-square-foot Christian Cultural Center in New York City, gave MacDonald an interview in 2008. "Jesus said 'seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you'," he said. "The idea is that if you can abandon materialism and put God first in our life, then he will give you that materialism back so that you can do something with it." Is he right in that interpretation? (p. 4)
- 2) In the 1960s, many denominations sought to play down their differences. In what ways does this reveal the power of religious consumerism to shape institutions? (p. 17)
- 3) Which examples from MacDonald's experience in ministry demonstrate the extent to which the business model has made its way into the decision-making processes of small churches? (pp. 22-23)
- 4) The author writes that megachurches, defined as those with at least 2,000 attendees on an average weekend, provide particularly salient examples of consumer-driven churches. What can attendees of megachurches do to ensure they're being genuinely challenged on a personal level and growing in virtue from month to month?
- 5) How might attendees of any church, large or small, signal to leaders and to one another that they want to be challenged and stretched on the level of the heart?
- 6) As early as the 1950s, marketers have convinced Americans to want whatever spares them discomfort. Why is this potentially harmful for spiritual growth? (p. 26)

Bringing the message home:

- 1) Why do churches increasingly look, sound, and act like American corporations?
- 2) How does our church present itself? Do we make clear that we're about more than satisfying desires?
- 3) How can we draw people to the Church and to the Gospel if we don't promise to satisfy their wish lists?
- 4) When have we heard sermons in this church that made us feel uncomfortable? How did we respond to those challenges? Did we welcome the discomfort? Or did we see it as a sign that something was wrong and needed fixing? How might we show our pastor that we want to be challenged from the pulpit? (p. 26)

Turning ideas into action:

Explore the history of our local church. Distribute copies of key founding documents, such as a church covenant, or statements of faith and mission. Then share copies of documents that reflect the church's priorities today: mission statement (if the church has one), annual budget and calendar for the year. Invite group members to read these documents, either in the group or at home. After reading them, discuss how the church's sense of mission has evolved over time. How have our values changed? Have we lost our way somehow under pressure from market forces?

CHAPTER 2: ON A MISSION TO ENTERTAINScripture

- Matthew 5:43-48
- Matthew 18:15-17

Some key points:

- The tendency for churches to act as entertainment venues grow directly out of America's new, customer-driven religious marketplace. Churches increasingly need to please customers who expect direct satisfaction in every area of their life, including the religious sphere. This is an ominous development for a society that relies on the Church more than any other institution to mold the citizenry's highest values and aspirations (p. 32).
- As the Church loses sight of its core mission, less-entertaining elements of church life are becoming endangered or lost altogether (p. 38).
- True spiritual growth requires true remorse—not just going through the motions—in order for an individual to move beyond destructive habits. Yet Americans seldom recognize their deep need for repentance since American culture offers precious few opportunities to admit guilt (p. 40).
- A preacher's job amounts to more than taking orders like a waiter and making sure everyone's tastes are indulged. His or her mission in the pulpit is to proclaim God's Word in such a way that hearts might open towards God's ways and values. That sometimes means comforting the afflicted, or afflicting the comfortable, or convincing attendees of their capacities to live morally courageous lives (p. 48).
- The goal of elevating hearts will remain an abstract ideal until the adoption of particular practices, structures, and systems makes it a reality (p. 58).

Discussing the argument:

- 1) Some pastors believe entertainment in their churches is justified when it serves a good purpose such as conveying a poignant message. But MacDonald argues the quest to entertain has gone too far. He says the Church, its supporters, and American society pay a high price for confusing entertainment with the Church's true mission. What are some ways in which the Church suffers by focusing on entertainment in place of more important goals? (p. 35)
- 2) The author claims that the Church diminishes its ability to shape desires when it ventures full bore into the entertainment business, by trading its moral authority for a shot at greater popularity. Do you agree? What can your church do to grow its moral authority? How might sacrifice and shared commitments play a role? (p. 37)
- 3) How are so-called "vacationaries" potentially harmful for the communities they seek to serve? (p. 52)
- 4) How does International Partners in Mission (IPM) aim to deepen missionaries' faith? The author suggests IPM meets both market demands and spiritual needs. Do you agree? (pp. 54-56)

Bringing the message home:

- 1) What do couples planning their wedding ceremonies miss by choosing to act as self-interested customers in the new religious market place? How might our church revise its wedding policies or work with couples in new ways that reflect what our ministry is all about? (p. 43)
- 2) What has been the traditional role of baptism in our denomination? Does our congregation's practice of baptism retain those essential characteristics? (44)
- 3) The Church can find an appropriate role for entertainment, according to MacDonald. What example from scripture does the author use to suggest that Jesus had a playful side? What might be some guidelines or principles for making sure entertainment doesn't undermine the church's mission to shape hearts and character? (57)

Turning ideas into action:

Ask group members to do some thinking and writing before next week's meeting. What drew you to this church originally? What keeps you here now? What do you hope to gain from involvement in this community? How do you contribute? How do you hope to contribute in the future? In considering these questions, draft a personal mission statement for your life in this faith community.

CHAPTER 3: CHURCH AS THERAPYScripture

- 1 Corinthians 11:29
- Isaiah 5:22-23
- Amos 2
- Amos 5
- Mark 10:21

Some key points:

- God has been leading His people into unsettling situations in order to expand their hearts since long before the time of Jesus. Old Testament prophets from Amos to Zephaniah called people to abandon their indulgent ways and make sacrifices for higher purposes (pp. 61-62).
- American churches have seen a growth in small group participation since the 1990s. At the same time, many churchgoers say they are stalled in their spiritual growth. While small groups might offer members a sense of belonging, their therapeutic model is not challenging people enough to make real spiritual progress (pp. 65-66).
- More than psychiatrists or therapists, clergy are concerned with the condition of the heart. They're attuned, for instance, to the emergence of bad habits that might squelch love of neighbor and hope for the future. Yet pastors usually aren't invited, as they were in prior centuries, to know the intimate details of congregants' lives. Nor are today's clergy trained to pry where they're not invited. Hence churchgoers get what they want in the short term: soothing comfort for coping with pain. They don't get the deeper analysis or the push to choose hard roads that they so often need (p. 71).
- When the Church marks important occasions, believers traditionally adjust their day-to-day practices temporarily to show particular reverence through voluntary restraint. Christians across the centuries fasted, for instance, on somber holy days or when the need to make big decisions called for a humble disposition to clear a path for higher wisdom. But the pursuit of comfort in the Church has tamped down this higher impulse. This can be seen in the changing rituals surrounding Lent and funerals (pp. 72-73).

Discussing the argument:

- 1) MacDonald writes that it's part of the Church's very mission to make people uncomfortable sometimes. Do you agree? (p. 61)
- 2) Feeding a culture of victimhood might get a congregation's attention, but it makes for a weak community. Why? (p. 63)
- 3) The author suggests that despite their shortcomings, small-group ministries are well-positioned to play a major role in character formation. How? (p. 67)
- 4) What has the Church lost by letting go of temporary practices such as fasting that show reverence through voluntary restraint? (pp. 72-73)
- 5) In the market-driven Church, funeral practices increasingly reflect what as a priority over other values? (p. 76)
- 6) What burial rituals have Christians practiced since ancient times? How do these practices symbolically bear witness to particular tenets of the faith? (p. 78)
- 7) What did parishioners of Woodland Hills Church in Minnesota do when their pastor, Gregory Boyd, refused to echo their political views from the pulpit? What does this episode demonstrate? How might it be a cautionary tale for our congregation? (p. 80)

Bringing the message home:

- 1) What does the author say is missing from many current small group ministries? Are those features missing from small groups in our church? (p. 67)

- 2) What do congregants lose when leaders refrain from guiding or exhorting individuals in the ways of discipleship? How can churchgoers in our church encourage leaders to provide meaningful guidance and advice? (p. 69)
- 3) What does Romans 5 say about how character gets formed? How specifically might these principles be applied in our church? (p. 86)

Turning ideas into action:

Ask each person to bring to mind the other church groups where they're involved: affinity groups, governance groups, mission groups and so forth. As homework, have them write down how these groups play a therapeutic role in the lives of their participants. Then consider how they might play a more challenging role, one of encouraging individuals to stretch comfort zones and take on assignments that help them grow. What needs to happen in order to make these micro-communities into places that inspire people to embrace a harder road, make personal sacrifices and grow spiritually?

CHAPTER 4: A BUMPER CROP OF WEAK MORAL CHARACTER

Scripture

- Galatians 5:22
- John 17:12
- Matthew 18
- Mark 9
- Galatians 3:28
- Colossians 4:1
- Matthew 5:46-47

Some key statistics and points:

- When the Church is true to its mission, it elicits the gifts of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (p. 92, Galatians 5:22). These are benchmarks for measuring growth of character in church life.
- Serving niche constituencies in the religious marketplace, a growing number of special-interest groups have a stake in making sure conflict in church life never ends (p. 100).
- Scripture bears witness to a faith that breaks down boundaries by proclaiming there's neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, free nor slave in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Yet market-driven niche churches and affinity groups pursue a different ideal: ensuring that people mix primarily with their own kind (pp. 103-104).
- Attempts to purge the rigors of church life aren't helping grow the faith in America. In 1990, 86 percent of all Americans identified themselves as Christians. By 2008, that number had declined to 76 percent, according to the American Religious Identification Survey 2008. A full 90 percent of those who quit the faith in that period were non-Catholic—i.e., mostly Protestants (pp. 108-109).

Discussing the argument:

- 1) What are your thoughts when you consider statistical findings about obesity, youth cheating, pornography, and divorce among church attendees? In your experience, do churchgoers' lifestyles and habits appear to differ from those of their non-Christian neighbors? How? Please be specific. (98)
- 2) MacDonald argues that millions of Christians face crushing personal debts in part because the Church has failed to teach lifestyle restraint. What does scripture teach about managing desires for money and the things it can buy? (95)

Bringing the message home:

- 1) During the Catholic clergy's sexual-abuse crisis in 2004, the United Church of Christ rolled out a not-so-subtle advertisement apparently targeting disillusioned Catholics. Is this a fair and faithful way to grow a denomination? What might be a more appropriate way for a church to do marketing? (p. 102)
- 2) Jesus taught that his followers to learn to love those who appear to be unlovable (Matthew 4:46-47). What's to be gained by heeding this teaching? Who might we come to love if we were to cast our net of compassion more broadly? (106)
- 3) We hope our congregational life together will help form good people. Where specifically have we seen members of our church exhibit moral character traits in ways that have benefited our community? How are these traits taught or cultivated in our community? How might we do better?

Turning ideas into action: The Church is true to its mission when it elicits the gifts of the Holy Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). Choose one gift of the Spirit and list some ways we as a church can encourage its growth. How specifically might we stretch our comfort zones in order to help this trait blossom in our community? Then identify people groups whom we find difficult to love – criminals, immigrants, poor people, rich people...? Outline a concrete action plan for showing God's love, in a full and honest way, toward members of one of these groups.

CHAPTER 5: REDEEMING RELIGIOUS CONSUMERISM

Scripture:

- Acts 4:32
- John 8:11
- Matthew 10:17

Some key points:

- Despite flaws in how religious consumerism has been practiced to date, the approach has inherent merits: it is both appealing and flexible (p. 118).
- It is possible that consumer dynamics might actually guide the Church back to its roots—if only consumers would come to demand what they need and what the church profoundly has to offer (p. 121).
- Laypeople stay true to traditions of the early Church when they expect leaders to challenge and help them grow in virtue (p. 122-123).

- A redeemed religious consumerism has a salient precursor in Protestant movements that relied upon the laity to discern God's will (p. 125).
- The Church has a long tradition of asceticism to elevate members' personal desires. This deserves to be recovered and perhaps even reinvented to address today's crisis in Christian character formation and usher in a new era of enlightened religious consumerism (p. 137).

Discussing the argument:

- 1) What sort of questions was the author asked when looking for a parish ministry position? What sort of questions would have been more appropriate? (p. 124)
- 2) Give examples of lay-led programs both inside and outside of the Church that have sought to tackle tough, new challenges in U. S. history. (p. 126)
- 3) Discuss examples from the author's experience of seeking out personal challenges first, while training to be a minister, and also after he'd settled into ministry. (p. 131-132)
- 4) The author provides examples of tools pastors have to boost interest in ministries and devotional practices that expand human capacities to reflect God's love. Can you name them? (p. 134)
- 5) If human beings are saved by grace, then why should Christians practice sacrifice or self-denial? How should Christians respond to grace? (p. 136)
- 6) Can Contemporary Christians benefit by creating new forms of asceticism for today's world? Where might Christians in our time practice self-denial as a means to advance social change? (pp. 138 – 139)

Bringing the message home:

- 1) If churches are to be elevators of the soul in the twenty-first century, then laypeople will need to use their influence for purposes higher than getting their own wants satisfied. What might that look like in our church? (p. 122)
- 2) In an era of enlightened religious consumerism laypersons need not negotiate the new terrain alone. How can clergy guide their congregants in fulfilling their higher purposes? (pp. 129-130)
- 3) What could we say to our preachers from week to week to show them that we want to be challenged from the pulpit and can handle discomfort? How could we show them in concrete ways whether we're growing spiritually or not?
- 4) Churchgoers could bring an ascetic sensibility to the project of seeking God. Instead of seeking out the most entertaining or comforting church, they might look for preachers who will do what? (142)
- 5) In excess, asceticism can become masochistic and counterproductive. List some healthy guidelines for an ascetic approach to faith. (143)
- 6) To guard against legalism, participants in ascetic practices will need to convey vigilantly and often that what they do is a response to God's grace, not an attempt to earn divine favor. How can your church design safeguards to prevent these counterproductive attitudes from setting in? (143)

Putting ideas into action:

Identify some of the settings where spiritual authority is vested in our congregation. (Some churches value the counsel of elders, for instance, while others emphasize the authority of the pastor or of the congregation when it comes to consensus.) Remembering your personal mission

statement from chapter one, go to one of these sources of authority. Ask: ‘where do I need to grow? Which virtue do I need to cultivate with God’s help? What can you recommend that I do habitually over the next year to cultivate this virtue?’ Listen, go home and pray about what you’ve heard. Craft an action plan for growing this virtue and begin.

CHAPTER 6: SIGNS OF HOPE IN THE NEW RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE

Scripture

- 2 Peter 1:2-11
- James 1:2-15

Some key points:

- In October 2008, the author set out on a mission to see where and how the Church is effectively shaping hearts in the twenty-first century America. This search for insight led him to metropolitan Minneapolis/St. Paul, where he observed practices and conducted interviews at four Christian institutions: Woodland Hills Church, Abbey Way Covenant Church, Eagle Brook Church, and Augsburg College. Lessons learned in the Twin Cities, he figured, could be instructive elsewhere (p. 149).
- He discerned three core lessons: 1) customers in the religious marketplace are capable of demanding higher quality and getting it; 2) the Church’s authentic mission of shaping hearts can and should be carried out in varied forms; 3) heart shaping works best when Christians acknowledge that they need it (pp. 178-179).

Discussing the argument:

- 1) What does Ginny Schrenkler’s experience of choosing to move from an affluent suburb to an inner-city property suggest about the possibilities for spiritual growth in an age of religious consumerism? (p. 148)
- 2) Why does Woodland Hills Church, a megachurch in Maplewood, Minn., intentionally keep a low profile by meeting in a nondescript building with virtually no signage? (p. 150)
- 3) What challenge did Woodland Hills Pastor Greg Boyd give his congregation after reading an uncomfortable blog entry by a disabled girl who attends his congregation? (p. 151)
- 4) What is the vision for small group ministries at Woodland Hills Church? (p. 154)
- 5) Rev. Boyd told MacDonald: “To get your deepest need met—the one you may not even know you have—you first have to crucify yourself.” How do you understand what he is saying here? Is he right? (p. 157)
- 6) What did Ardie Gallant do when a parent insisted that children be welcome at every church-related event, including governance meetings? What was the result? (pp. 161-162)
- 7) During a sermon, what five habits did Eagle Brook pastor, Bob Merritt, advise members of his flock to adopt? Why? (164)
- 8) Diane Carlson told her group that she was furious toward her brother for his “extreme” form of disciplining his children. When she said she planned to confront him with righteous indignation, what did the director and group members refocus her attention on instead? (168)

- 9) How programs run by Augsburg College's Center for Global Education differ from those offered by entrepreneurial mission agencies that promise excitement, recreation and a few days of meaningful work? (170)
- 10) Which conditions have enabled participants in Augsburg's programs to grow spiritually? Where does Augsburg still have room for improvement in terms of challenging members of its community? (pp. 176-177)

Bringing the message home:

- 1) Tonya Toutge says that at the Church of the Abbey Way, "We're committed to not avoiding pain." Does this ethic apply in our church? Should it? (p. 161)
- 2) How does Woodland Hills keep overhead low and finances solid? Could these simple principles be incorporated into our church? (pp. 151-152)
- 3) Three core lessons gleaned in the Twin Cities could benefit congregations across America. What are they? How could these lessons apply in our church? (pp. 178-180)
- 4) One small group at Eagle Brook came together in search of something more than comfort. What did its members do that was distinctive and helpful for their spiritual formation? How might we follow their example somehow? (pp. 166-167)
- 5) One member of the Eagle Brook group found that fasting, coupled with her group's encouragement to stick with it, bred new habits of the heart. Does this approach to character formation ring true to scripture? To your experience? (p. 168)

Putting ideas into action:

New habits need sustenance over time to take root. Consider what worked in the Minneapolis churches featured in this chapter. Ponder where you've been stretched (for the better) beyond your comfort zone while doing action steps prescribed in previous weeks. Now craft a long-term plan for seeking challenge in congregational life. In it, write a few sentences explaining how you'll know if you're making progress in cultivating virtue and growing the gifts of the Spirit. Also write a few lines to remind yourself how and when you'll call on others in the church to be sources of challenge and encouragement. Pray for wisdom and start putting the plan in action.

EPILOGUE: FIXING THE IMMINENT FUTURE

Discussing the argument:

- 1) What are the hazards that come with churches entering into corporate partnerships? (pp. 182-183)
- 2) What are some signs that suggest values long associated with the Church are disturbingly scarce in American culture? (p. 184)
- 3) What makes the Church especially vulnerable to exploitation in our time? (p. 189)

Bringing the message home:

- 1) The author names ways churches might build new programs and reinvigorate sacred practices with an eye toward fostering virtue among their customers. How can our church adopt programs that accomplish these objectives? (186)

Author's afterword to Study Guide for *Thieves in the Temple*

Now that you've completed the study, I hope you'll share what you've learned and encourage friends in other church groups to use it as well. These are exciting times for the Church, but they're also rife with challenges. Cultivating a new consumer ethic that seeks challenge, not coddling, from our religious institutions is doable. I hope church-based discussion groups will help move that process along.

I'd like to offer a word of thanks to Dylan Klempner, who put many hours into the crafting of this study guide during his internship with me in summer 2011. Dylan is a gifted artist and writer who took the challenges posed in *Thieves* to heart. He's done the action steps prescribed in this guide. He's experienced the benefits of asking for more challenge in his church life. I'm grateful for the care he's brought to this project - most of the questions posed herein were his - and for his collegial approach. Thank you, Dylan.

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