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After the Garden is Gone: Megachurches, Pastoral, and Theologies of Consumption

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

—William Blake, "The Garden of Love"

This past April I visited Southland Christian Church in Lexington, KY, and was invited to attend a Poor Man’s After-Tax Dinner. Southland, located on a verdant 115-acre plot in the rapidly disappearing farmland between Lexington and Jessamine County, hosted a catered meal and a performance by the Dale Adams Band. Southland’s website promoted the evening by asking, “Did you have to pay when you filed taxes? This month’s Gathering is designed to help you to forget your IRS woes.”1 The After-Tax Dinner, it seems, was meant to console members of Southland’s flock, whose wallets ached after filing for the April 15th deadline. And, assuming that the last-minute SUVs in the church parking lots correspond to the financial wherewithal of Southland’s members, one might also assume that the dinner was an unqualified success, a welcome reprieve for those worshipper-consumers who belong to the bracket most taxed after having rendered their money unto Caesar.

Southland is Lexington’s largest megachurch. With at least 8,000 people attending each week and an operating budget sizable enough to sustain a staff of over eighty people, Southland exceeds most U.S. congregations in terms of financial resources and social clout.2 The church is similar to many other gargantuan worship centers, in that it claims to welcome diversity but is comprised mainly of a white, educated, middle-class core. According to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, which has provided the most thorough research about the megachurch movement available thus far, megachurch members are “more affluent on average than churchgoers of the nation as a whole.”3 Over one-fourth of megachurch attendees have a household income of over $100,000, and nearly two-thirds make at least $50,000.4 Southland, a massive estate that many Lexington residents pejoratively refer to as “Six Flags over Jesus,” is one example of a trend where evangelical Christians abandon modestly sized Mainline Protestant congregations, often located in downtown areas, and instead attend large-scale, non-denominational worship and entertainment venues that occupy expansive suburban and exurban properties. Since the early 1990s, scholarly and popular critics note that megachurches have proliferated by attracting sojourners who are disgruntled with Mainline Protestantism and its “irrelevant” rituals, and they have also burgeoned by enticing a large cohort of people who are new to organized and institutionalized religion.5

Megachurches have been successful because they convince such spiritual nomads to join a new fold, where they can embark on a chic, Christian journey and chat about it over coffee in the church bistro. Like other churches that assume the big-box retail design, Southland overwhelms people who attend with hip worship music and opportunities to purchase books, t-shirts, and similar Christian-themed kitsch. More importantly, communities like Southland forgo the conventional sermonic form and instead peddle biblical aphorisms that can be digested via PowerPoint slides and YouTube clips. Megachurches call their members “users” (or “seekers”) because market research has shown that “lay” or “congregation” suggest a stodgy, outdated image that alienates the target churchgoer. To offer a more enticing product, megachurches also rid their sanctuaries of traditional Christian iconography, such as crosses, stained glass windows, and the Bible, because the same market research reveals that these symbols make many churchgoers uncomfortable. Megachurches’ attention to consumer preference parleys into a theology of consumption that informs almost every aspect of the spiritual education they offer.6 Because megachurches have been so prolific, they spearhead a consumptive ethos that has infiltrated even the smallest congregations in the U.S., due in large part to successful media products. This growth has, in turn, reinforced evangelical Christianity’s uncritical adaptation of capitalism as a model for spiritual development. To those who see megachurches as symptomatic of a flawed Christianity, market-minded church growth confounds one of the religion’s oldest polarities: the task of living in the world while trying not to conform to its ways. Megachurches offer a religious experience that appears to absolve this tension. Perpetuating an apparent contradiction, megachurches encourage their members to reject “things of the world” even while they stake out spiritual identities by purchasing such things. Megachurches seek to win the lost and wow the consumer simultaneously.

Although sociologists and cultural critics who are skeptical of megachurches condemn the synergy of missionary fervor and capitalist ideology, they often balk when the moment arrives to articulate exactly what makes these evangelical empires socially and doctrinally reprehensible. For example, consider Omri Elisha, who expresses a commonly-held sentiment that “[e]ven people who do not believe in Christ the Redeemer still want to believe in a Christ that throws a fit when money-changers show up at the temple.”7 Elisha
seems to suggest that the ethical framework Christianity offers is salvageable only if it opposes the evils of capital economy. He is one among many who discredits evangelical capitalism with the conviction that Jesus—who says it is harder for a wealthy person to enter heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle—would not condone exploitative industries, like usury on sacred worship space. The intuition that Jesus would chide a faith undergirded by capitalism may be correct, and it is probable that Jesus would disparage megachurches—not-for-profit conglomerates that comprise a $7.2 billion industry in the United States and exploit their tax-exempt status to build material empires and propagate a right-wing agenda. However, this interpretation of Jesus cleansing the temple explains the perniciousness of evangelical capitalism only in part.

The seeming incompatibility between Christianity and the marketplace is just one aspect of a recurring pattern whereby megachurches implement theologies infused with capitalist ideology to uphold the upper-middle class status quo. Evangelicals themselves have long since resolved the quandary of intertwining the sanctuary with the market while following a figure, Jesus, who teaches that earthly systems contradict the critical worldview that New Testament writers painstakingly develop. And, of course, megachurch leaders fully realize how fluid the slippage is between evangelism and entrepreneurialism, and most freely admit that evangelism is marketing, and marketing is evangelism. After all, if churches are “pushing a high-concept product [like] eternal life,” why should they separate these categories?16 In the minds of most evangelicals, the clarion call to recruit members and expand the church does not bespeak bad-faith corporate entrepreneurialism; rather, it implements in a pastor of Carson Valley Christian Church in Minden, NV, a spiritual leader who refers to himself as a “PastorPreneur.”17 And then there’s Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL, the first thoroughly market-driven megachurch. Willow Creek seeks out MBA-credentialed men (in lieu of those with a theological or ministerial education) to hold church leadership positions. The church, adept at branding the spiritual experience it provides, has launched a marketing arm that offers consultations, workshops, and seminars for smaller congregations that seek to deliver similar programming. Willow Creek’s media raise additional revenue and teach other pastors how to become business-savvy leaders who can replicate the parent church’s stratagem and grow their own smaller churches accordingly.

To be sure, megachurches have infiltrated the literal and figurative landscape of U.S. evangelical Christianity because they provide good customer service (and the customer is, they say, always right). However, it’s not just market-based theology that drives the success of megachurches. I suspect that a second key impulse that drives megachurches is the Christian affinity for sheep and shepherds, or, stated less glibly, its incultation of pastoral ideology. Jeff Shari...
allegiance of large congregations, Warren is like many megachurch pastors in that he reaches millions of other evangelicals through sundry media enterprises. The presence of Warren and other megachurch leaders presents a salient modern example of the "routinization of charisma," a phenomenon, Max Weber suggests, that ultimately enables "the continuously effective routines of workaday life" to infiltrate organized religion. With a powerful yet unimposing personality, the charismatic megachurch leader, Weber's version of a creative genius and entrepreneur, helps followers to transcend the strictures of boredom and eventually become participants in bureaucratic order.

"The Lord is my Shepherd": Evangelicalism and Pastoral

It is a commonplace to speak of a faith community as a "fold," a charismatic presence like Warren as a "shepherd" or "pastor" (which comes from the Latin word for "shepherd"), and a congregation as a "flock." These metaphors cast religious experience in terms of the pastoral motif, which can be traced back to the Old Testament's most famous poem, the twenty-third Psalm. In that well-known verse, the analogy of God as a good shepherd who leads his sheep beside still waters culminates with the promise of radical equality, where every person receives the chance to "dwell in the house of the Lord" forever. Pastoral literature provides a way to talk about spiritual, social, and ethical relationships between humans, God, and nature. Pastoral not only elicits a sentimental yearning for repose in nature, but also seeks to create a utopian ideal in which the threat of loss dissipates into a serene union with the natural world. William Empson argues in Some Versions of Pastoral (1935), his still-influential study, that the pastoral fundamentally reduces the complex to the simple. According to Empson, the "essential trick of the old pastoral, which was felt to imply a beautiful relationship between the rich and the poor, was to make simple people express strong feelings." In this way, the pastoral appeals to emotion—which is central to the evangelical experience—as a way of establishing stable community and finding salvation. Under the pastoral rubric, this quest for stability develops to become a way that people think they can evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the present.

I believe that megachurches adopt a pastoral aesthetic (theologically, geographically, and architecturally) because the predilection of contemporary evangelicalism is to recoil from societal problems, specifically patterns of injustice. Pastoral often works according to a problematic logic of retreat, as ecclectic Lawrence Buell has pointed out. Synthesizing the pastoral impulse in American literature and culture, Buell argues that the trope "cannot be pinned to a single ideological position." His example, a close reading of an essay by Henry David Thoreau, entitled "Slavery in Massachusetts," affords Buell the opportunity to show how pastoral thinking can pull people into a mindset where they shirk their duty to be socially engaged. Buell demonstrates how Thoreau, amidst a screed against slavery, complains that the mere thought of the United States spoils his walk through a patch of white water lilies. For Thoreau, the white water lily is a symbol of purity, yet he writes, "I shall not soon despair of the world for [this flower], notwithstanding slavery, and the cowardice and want of principle of Northern men." It would seem Thoreau's reflection on the lilies evinces a desire to retreat to a "simplified green world," where he doesn't have to think about difficult problems (in this case, the perpetuation of slavery).

However, Buell points out that "[e]ven at its most culpable—the moment of willful retreat from social and political responsibility—[pastoral] may be more strategized than
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mystified."33 Thoreau's dismay that thoughts of injustice would sully his saunter by the lilies might seem befitting of pastoral's fundamental escapism, but it's possible, Buell mystified. Thoreau's dismay "The structures of institutionalized religion. Areas, distance themselves from such strife, and worship in a safe, serene locale.34 As Vaughn Jeff Sharlet asked New Life resolve apparent contradictions and retreat to a realm of green bliss, so too does its nature. Just as the pastoral provides contemporary evangelicalism with a metaphorical battle between Satan and the Children of God, are especially aware of spiritual attack, so it's no surprise that they prefer to live, shop, and worship, as far away from demonic city centers as possible. While working on assignment in Colorado Springs, Jeff Sharlet asked New Life Church members if they could recommend any restaurants in the city, only to find that

Whenever I asked where to eat, they would warn me away from downtown's restaurant grid of cafes and ethnic joints. Stick to the Academy they'd tell me, referring to the vein of superstores and prepackaged eateries—P.F. Chang's, California Pizza Kitchen, et al.—that bypasses the city. Downtown, they said, is "confusing."36

The "confusion" megachurch members seek to avoid, spiritual and social, reinforces evangelicalism's ability to seek repose beside the still waters of social affluence and avoid confronting scenes of inequality. Of course, megachurches also develop in the suburbs and exurbs to establish and reinforce class boundaries. Outside the reach of public transportation routes, megachurches effectively make it difficult for economically underprivileged people—especially those who do not own a car—to attend.

Having retreated from the city, megachurches make "choices regarding location and treatment of exterior grounds [that] indicate how that congregation conceptualizes the relationship between themselves and the rest of society."37 Often congregations distance themselves from society by constructing ornate landscapes and expansive seas of concrete parking lots, which surround megachurches and provide a buffer between the sanctity of its facilities and the troublesome, sinful outside world. Many other megachurches, such as

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Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, TN, and Willow Creek, install lakes that accentuate the separation between their congregation and society. In these instances, natural elements (trees, fields, and streams) are literally used to facilitate pastoral escapism. The Saddleback Church also prides itself on its landscape, which we might imagine to be a perverse application of the mid-1990s bohemian bourgeois ethos.38 According to Rick Warren, Saddleback attempts to provide a naturalist church experience that connects worshippers with God's creation. Warren told a news reporter that "People always say they feel closer to God in nature. When God made Adam and Eve, he put them in a garden, not a skyscraper."39 Saddleback has a large glass window that allows for worshippers to soak in the Southern California sky while listening to sermons. Architectural features like this intend to unify churchgoers with nature while still keeping them safely secluded from sin and contamination.

If megachurch exteriors take worshippers back to nature, church interiors seeks to amplify culture, and the individual sovereignty that accompanies it. Herein rests yet another central paradox: megachurches encapsulate both the simplicity of the pastoral ideal and the complexity of the marketplace. Large, spacious sanctuaries, oversized atriums, sprawling food courts, and open concourses—all megachurch staples—reinforce a consumer-driven sense of sovereignty. The glut of space that megachurches provide allows congregants to "maintain control over [their] perambulations and decisions," thus contributing to the illusion of choice that echoes the ways in which most members "accept or reject theology as [they] see fit."40 Megachurch landscaping and architecture, both not-so-subtle appeals to the human pastoral affinity, allow its users to fellowship, worship, and commune with the divine on their terms, and without conflict.

Render Unto Caesar

The anecdote with which I began this essay, Southland's "After-Tax Dinner," indicates that megachurch members pay tribute in good faith that their obedience to governmental authority is an expression of their godliness. As taxpayers and members of the middle class, they are like most Americans, people who, according to Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, "have not only grown accustomed to large organizations, but they have even had their characters and tastes shaped by them."41 Thus, the support of governmental authority by paying taxes is a corollary of megachurch theology, which, I have demonstrated, is shaped by people who understand that the benefits imperial economy affords is the bread and butter of megachurch growth. Unequivocally, megachurch Christians avoid conflict with the state, even though this tension remains at the heart of the ethic Jesus expresses in the Synoptic Gospels. Such adherence to established authorities, I imagine, stems from the way megachurch evangelicals read the gospels' famous meditation on paying taxes, Jesus' verbal exchange with the Pharisees. In this pericope, the Pharisees approach Jesus while he is teaching to a crowd and attempt to trap him by posing a politically loaded question. The Pharisees proclaim:

Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?42
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If Jesus answers that it is lawful to pay taxes, he will offend his Jewish followers, who abhor Roman imperial oppression and see submission to earthly authorities as untenable. However, if Jesus advocates nonpayment of taxes, he provides the Pharisees with reason to hand him over as an insurrection to the Roman state. Instead of answering the Pharisees, Jesus retorts with an order and then another question:

"Bring me a denarius and let me see it." And they brought one. Then he said to them, "Whose head is on this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Jesus said to them, "Give to the emperor [or Caesar] all things that are the emperor's, and to God, the things that are God's." ⁴³

Jesus, by asking the Pharisees to produce a coin from their own pockets, forces their hand in the argument and exposes their own hypocritical collaboration with the Roman establishment. Furthermore, by baiting the Pharisees to admit that they carry in their pockets a graven image of another god—Caesar Augustus—Jesus establishes that their idolatry is untenable, given their Jewish piety. ⁴⁴ Jesus' answer to the Pharisees, really a non-answer, diffuses a highly charged situation. As most biblical scholars note, in this account Jesus does not affirm complicit participation with an earthly kingdom. Rather, he "shows an attitude of critical distancing vis-à-vis civil authority." ⁴⁵ Jesus, like other moments in the gospels, in no way advocates supporting the Roman Empire. Instead, his answer establishes an attitude of conflict, one that necessarily opposes earthly systems of imperial dominance in favor of allegiance to the Kingdom of God.

Given the pastoral impulse that guides megachurches, specifically their tendency to absolve conflict of any kind, it should come as no surprise that megachurches revise Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees in this passage. The most glaring instance of this taking place is the Saddleback Church's PurposeDriven ministry education arm, which produces curricula, pre-authored sermons, and Bible study outlines that ministers can use in their own churches. One such lecture in PurposeDriven's Matthew and Friends Leadership Training Program offers a tellingly conservative explication of Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees:

God wants us to obey others He puts in authority over us - God wants me to obey MY EMPLOYERS and MY GOVERNMENT. Jesus obeyed the rulers of His time. When the religious leaders of the day wanted to know what Jesus thought about paying taxes to an oppressive government, Jesus said - Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. (Matthew 22:21b) (NIV) Jesus understood that earthly authority is just a temporary picture of eternal authority, so Jesus taught us to obey even flawed leaders now so we can understand how to obey the Perfect Leader, later. The Bible says - Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. (Romans 13:1) ⁴⁶

One doesn't need a vivid imagination to see the agenda of this reading, especially its instruction to "obey even flawed leaders now" (could this mean the Bush or Obama administrations?). Saddleback's PurposeDriven ministry presents free-association exegesis, amalgamates Bible passages from different contexts (note the linkage between Matthew and Paul), and builds a pastiche of English Bible translations and paraphrases in such a way that hijacks the "Render Unto Caesar" passage to make it mean exactly what it never could have meant.

One wonders if megachurches can sustain the constant process of adaptability, change, and meeting the consumer's needs without themselves becoming an outdated blip on the U.S. spiritual radar screen. Consumer-driven doctrine might eventually relegate megachurches an ineffectual religious experience, an insiders-only meeting for believers that has no lasting effect on the society from which it seeks to escape. When he wrote his "Letter From Birmingham Jail" in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. chastised the church for turning a blind eye toward social injustice. King said, "[i]f today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century." ⁴⁷ While large churches did exist when King wrote, he could not possibly have imagined the full-extent of today's technology-laden, ultra-landscaped exurban megachurches, which now wield a disproportionate amount of influence in the United States evangelical milieu, yet bear little resemblance to how the Gospel writers represent Jesus.

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Notes


2 According to Dan Wakefield, megachurches are those congregations that have 3,500 attendees each week. See The Hijacking of Jesus: How the Religious Right Distorts Christianity and Promotes Violence and Hate (New York: Nation Books, 2006), p. 111.


4 Ibid.


13 Ibid.


17 Ibid.


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Thumma, Scott and Dave Travis, Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn From America's Largest Churches. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007. 95