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Andrew Battista

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 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 late-model luxury 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 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 late-model luxury 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 when you filed taxes?

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 "laziness" 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. 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 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.8 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.9 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 such uneasy collaboration with earthly systems contradicts the critical worldview that New Testament writers painstakingly develop. And, of course, megachurch leaders fully realize how 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?10 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 literal way the ultimate marketing campaign: Jesus' Great Commission to make disciples of all nations.11 Indeed, most megachurches appropriate capitalism flagrantly and already see the parallels between the church and the market as being obvious. Take, for instance, Ted Haggard, the former and now recovering (or is it recovered?) homosexual pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, CO. Haggard argues "that for Christianity to prosper in the free market, it needs more than 'moral values'—it needs consumer value."12 Or, consider John Jackson, pastor of Carson Valley Christian Center in Minden, NV, a spiritual leader who refers to himself as a "PastorPreneur."13 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-savy leaders who may 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 incultication of pastoral ideology. Jeff Sharlet suggests that megachurches proliferate by offering a faith community whose main selling point is a lack of conflict. In his mind, megachurches cater to a religious faction that replicates a fundamental mystification, a retreat to a nonexistent Golden Age of harmony.14 Sharlet interprets contemporary evangelicalism as a culture that expresses theocacy, or a quest to understand the presence of evil in the world, in terms of geographic locale. Christians remove themselves from the complexity of urban life, where evil runs rampant, and retreat to the safety and still waters of suburbia, a journey they believe bolsters their spiritual health. This movement, given credence by market-based ideologies, generates a new brand of Christianity imbued with the seductions of the literary pastoral. Pastoral literature, originally poems in which shepherd speakers rest in states of receptive leisure and reflect idealistically on their experience with nature, has, according to Terry Gifford, exfoliated into a trope versatile enough "to both contain and appear to evade tensions and contradictions—betwren country and city, art and nature, the human and the non-human, [and] our social and inner selves."15 The pastoral impulse elucidates many evangelicals’ fear of confusing and spiritually volatile urban environments. The exurban location of most megachurches, their architectural features, and their landscape designs reinforce consumer sovereignty while lulling Christians into a bucolic idyll, in which they cannot recognize their complicity in social inequality.

This essay argues that pastoral ideology, which has informed the American literary and cultural tradition since at least the Puritans, should be considered in tandem with capitalism as the contemporary evangelical megachurch movement’s chief ideological framework. As megachurch members leave the city and retreat to the country, they participate in the fantasy that they can flee complexity and absolve themselves from the confrontational, oppositional ethic of the Kingdom of God that informed early Christianity. In what follows, I will explain how narratives of the marketplace function to develop a pastoral-megachurch-Christian worldview, where spiritual seekers can choose to embrace a faith that refuses to rob them of their comfort. The capitalism that megachurches appropriate fosters the illusion that economic growth can create efficient ways of expanding property. In reality, the capitalist theologies that megachurches espouse enable the wealthy elite—and those who support them by acting as spiritual consumers—to practice religion in a way that damages rural landscapes ecologically and upholds upper-middle class advantage.

Narratives of the Marketplace

As Willow Creek’s marketing model would indicate, megachurches perpetuate by advancing consumption-based theologies that emphasize their survival skills. Of the many shibboleths that evangelism embraces, few appear as clearly as economic and social Darwinism. Megachurch pastors often attribute their growth not to the Lord’s Spirit, as one might assume, but instead to their church’s ability to outwit, oust, and survive competition. Multiple church histories indicate that “successful megachurch leaders adapt to demographic and social change; they target potential worshipers based on their lifestyles; and they use multiple communication channels to deliver messages that are relevant to people’s lives.”16 Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, interprets his church’s growth as a natural consequence of its adaptability. According to Osteen, “[i]f the churches have not kept up, and they lose people by not changing with the times,“17 Rodney Stark, a sociologist who applies Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” paradigm to institutional religion, has analyzed the resonance between economic Darwinism and faith communities. According to Stark, the cutthroat spiritual market, where many
After the Garden is Gone

doctrinal perspectives vie for people's allegiances, winnows away churches that are not fit to survive: "competition among religious organizations in any society stimulates effort, thus increasing the overall level of religious commitment and causing the demise of faiths lacking sufficient market appeal."18

Not surprisingly, then, megachurches often sing their own praises to the cadence of an inspirational Horatio Alger-style melody. Megachurches in this instance resemble corporations that recount their ascendance through tales of meager beginnings, cramped spaces, and sparse attendance—all hardships overcome en route to plush auditoriums and influential cable television ministries. Southland, for instance, boasts that it grew out of "a vision [...] One hundred and seventy-two people attended the first service on July 8, 1956. Nearly five decades later, [it averages] over 8,000 in attendance."19 Following a similar vein, Lake Forest, CA's Saddleback Church represents its success on its website both in prose form and with a "quick facts" format:

Year the Church Began: 1980
Founded by: Rick and Kay Warren
Size of first Bible study: 7 people
Average attendance today: 20,000+
New Believers baptized in past 10 years: 12,000
Church campus: 120 acres

As the Saddleback story goes, Warren, "fresh out of seminary," left Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas with his wife and all his possessions, which fit "on the back of a U-haul truck," and went to California to start a church.21 What began as a small Bible study, held in Warren's modest apartment, evolved into "one of the most exciting journeys of growth that any church has experienced in American history."22

Finally, there's the largest congregation in the U.S., Osteen's Lakewood Church, which boasts a story that may trump other megachurch historiographies in its pomp. According to Lakewood's website, "[the church's] origins were humble. In fact, the first meeting of Lakewood Church was held in a converted feed store on the outskirts of Houston."23 Today, Lakewood meets in the refurbished 16,000-seat Compaq Center, former home of the NBA's Houston Rockets. (One wonders if Lakewood's historical narrative alludes to Christ's own humble beginnings in a barn, which, according to the gospel account, still housed livestock at the time of his birth). These rags-to-riches tales are important to megachurches because they form their identities and influence their theological visions. The narratives pass off American Dream opulence as the inevitable teleology for the thriving, God-seeking church, and once megachurch-goers sense that their continued participation in that economy as an expression of the theological visions. The narratives pass off American Dream opulence as the inevitable teleology for the thriving, God-seeking church, and once megachurch-goers sense that their continued participation in that economy as an expression of...
After the Garden is Gone

mystified." 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 argues, that Thoreau's turn to the lilies is a self-conscious rhetorical strategy for "exposing public consensus as repressive and arbitrary." Thoreau's remark can be read as a very commentary on how indefensible it is to sequester oneself from society and escape to nature. Just as the pastoral provides contemporary evangelicalism with the framework to resolve apparent contradictions and retreat to a realm of green bliss, so too does its metaphorical and rhetorical framework allow for pastoral critics to exercise its impulses as a method of critique. For an example, one needs to look no further than William Blake's "The Garden of Love," a simplistic rhyme that indict religion for its hypocrisy (see the epigraph). Its fundamental pathos is lament, for the loss of a literal landscape and a spiritual purity, both of which, in his mind, have been destroyed by the literal and symbolic structures of institutionalized religion.

Megachurches do not reenact the pastoral's fundamental movement from the city to the country simply because they like to build on cheap, spacious plots of land. Rather, the megachurch pastoral retreat seems to ameliorate for many evangelicals the confusion of living in a fallen world. John N. Vaughn, a consultant who offers his services to aspiring church pastors, lauds megachurches for their ability to identify spiritual warfare in urban areas, distance themselves from such strife, and worship in a safe, serene locale. As Vaughn sees it, megachurches remain inaccessible to "gang members [and other] power groups [who] usually know that it is best to keep a respectable distance from worship centers, where the power of God is obviously present." Megachurch members, warriors in 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 network 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." 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." 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 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. 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." 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] permutations 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." 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." 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? 
After the Garden is Gone

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 absorb 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, "[If 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.


14 Sosnik, Dowd, and Former, Applebee's America, p. 95, emphasis added.


20 Ibid.


22 Ibid.

23 "Warren's The Purpose Driven Life, the fastest-selling nonfiction book ever, has sold over 23 million copies since 2002. Publishers have marketed the book by encouraging churches to purchase mass quantities and complete a numerologically significant "40 Days of Purpose Study."
After the Garden is Gone


