Windows on the World Prof. Phillip Cary
Eastern University
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# Consumerism: The Ethics of Unfaithfulness

**Intro.** You often hear it said that we in America are materialistic, that we love material things too much. I don't think that's quite right. I think our particular form of materialism, which has been helpfully labeled consumerism, means that we are trained to desire material things but not to love them. What I mean by that can be illustrated by a Christmas story.

**A Christmas Story**. It's a true story. When my youngest son Jacob was a little over one and a half years old, he opened Christmas presents for the first time in his life under a Christmas tree in our apartment along with his two brothers, his mother and me. I'm afraid I can't capture for you Jacob's inimitable quiet sweetness, so different from the driven intensity of his brother Christopher or the bouncy cheerfulness of his oldest brother Jonathan. Suffice it to say that he opened his first present with a kind of gentle attentiveness, smiled at it, and started playing. Maybe it was something with wheels and he wanted to learn how it goes. But instead of racing all over the house with it he sat peacefully with it, pushing it around in his vicinity, getting to know it.

But then he got interrupted, and here's the point of the story. Before he could really begin to get to know the one present, we were shoving another present at him. We had gone around one turn already, everybody had gotten their first present, and now it was time for round two, so Jacob had to open another present. He didn't get to know that first toy at all. The demands of Christmas—or perhaps I should say of *comsumer* Christmas—required him to stop paying attention to the first toy that he was so interested in, and get on to another one. That was a shock to me, shocking enough that I remember it to this day, how it interrupted him, how it broke the gentle attentiveness he was lavishing upon this lovely new *thing*, how it forced him to shift his attention to something else.

And it hurt my heart. I can't tell you how much I loved seeing him begin to establish a relationship with that first toy—but those of you who are parents and love watching your toddlers interacting with the world will know what I mean—and the demand that he open a new present seemed to me harsh and destructive; it spoiled something beautiful. It prevented him from learning to love the thing he had, which he was just beginning to do, and required him to start desiring something new right away. By doing Christmas the way we were supposed to do it in our consumerist society, we were training him not to love things but to desire them—always wanting new things, never cherishing the things we have. So that's why I think consumerism is not about loving things at all. Even material things. For if we *loved* the things we have, cherished them and cared for them, we would not desire so many new things all the time, and of course it's the desire to get new things that drives a consumer economy. A consumer culture has a vested interest in seeing that we don't get too attached even to material things. It is a culture of shallow and transient attachments, of desire rather than love.

**A different kind of childhood.** Think of how different our children are, how much less opportunity they have to love things, than children from a less affluent and consumerist era. This struck me at the time because we had been reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder books to our

children, *Little House on the Prairie, Little House in the Big Woods*, and so on, about growing up on the America frontier in the 19th century, and you may remember that little Laura Ingalls had one doll, just one, for many years in her childhood, and she loved that doll—in a way that my son Jacob was being trained not to love anything in his life. The consumer culture in which we were training him to live would do its best to make sure that he *could* not love like that, with that kind of constancy and faithfulness.

**The Language of Consumerist Ethics** For in addition to the demand that we keep getting new things, consumerism does its best—with a great deal of success—to impose its own ethics on us, its own consumerist view of the good life, which would have us believe that there is something wrong with clinging to one thing with constancy and faithfulness—a child fixated on a favorite toy, a person who can't let go and move on. You can see it in the language we use, the fact that words like "constancy" have dropped out of our moral vocabulary, while clichés like the need to "move on with your life" are ready at head to explain why we can't stay too attached to the same old things or even the same old people. "Moving on" has become a label for one of our most important obligations in life. I suppose many of you young people can't even remember a time when that wasn't so, but I can tell you it's a fairly recent development. People were not always told, "you have to move on with your life." I wonder why it's so wrong to stay where you are for a while, getting to know what you have or even grieving over what you have lost—for grief too is an outgrowth of love.

**Questioning the Taken-for-Granted** It's worth thinking about—because one of the best ways to come to a deeper understanding of a society is to think about its clichés, the things that are taken for granted in the culture, as if they were obvious and didn't need an explanation or a reason. And if it's your own society you're trying to understand, then it's a very worthwhile exercise to try questioning its clichés—especially the clichés that are so much a part of you that you feel like there must be something wrong with you if you question them. Those are the clichés that are deepest in our heart, and they got there for a reason—they serve a social purpose that is often hidden from us until we begin to question them. I'm suggesting, of course, that the cliché, "You have to move on with your life" is there in our hearts because it was put there by consumer society, it was inculcated in us because it serves the needs of a consumer economy by making us better consumers. That's what I mean by "consumerist ethics."

Not that we were explicitly taught it, like in school or church. That would give us an opportunity to question it, and the whole point is that we're not supposed to question our deepest clichés, we're supposed to take them for granted, like when at the end of a 30 minute TV show we learn that the deep truth of our lives is—yes!—that we have to move on. And we all nod our heads or get a lump in our throats or even a tear in our eye, because we know—somehow we just know—it's true. We can't explain it, we just know. Who could possibly doubt that you have to move on with your life? You'd have to be some awful loser who doesn't really have a life.

What I'm getting at is that the clichés that are most important to question are the ones that make you feel uneasy about yourself when you question them. You think: "what's wrong with me? How could I question that?" Those are the clichés that are really hard to question, because it's as if they insist on remaining unquestioned. And for good reason. As soon as you question them, the reasons for believing them fade away like smoke on the wind. The really powerful clichés in our lives are the ones for which we don't have good reasons; they get their power from the fact that we would never think of giving reasons for them—it would feel like explaining the

obvious. It's so obvious that if you don't get it, well, then there must be something wrong with you.

This taken-for-grantedness of certain privileged clichés, together with the sense that there must be something wrong with us if we question them, is a measure of the social power of widely-accepted ideas in our culture, and also of the power of their presence in our hearts. Their taken-for-grantedness means not only that we don't think to question them, but we would feel guilty for questioning them. That feeling, let me suggest, is a good indication that this is an idea we really should question.

It takes courage to question what everyone, including yourself, takes for granted. Societies are built on what everyone takes for granted, what is never questioned. To question the taken-for-granted is to become a kind of intellectual rebel, and you will run into resistance, not just externally, when people ask "What's the matter with you?" but also internally, because you'll almost inevitably ask yourself, "what's wrong with me?" When you feel that in your heart, you are feeling the social power of the taken-for-granted. The taken-for-granted is trying to stay taken for granted by making you feel guilty for questioning it. It does take courage. But precisely that guilt feeling (that feeling of "what's wrong with me?") is a good sign that here's a good place to begin digging, to begin questioning and uncovering what's really going on in our culture.

**Example from a sub-culture** Since questioning the ethics of consumerism, which is such a powerful force in our society, really does take this kind of courage, let me illustrate from a case where it's actually a bit easier to see how it works. Some of you will know what this feels like from the inside. There are lots of churches which try to make you feel guilty if you question what that particular church teaches. And they often succeed for a while, but seldom for very long. To succeed permanently, they'd have to shut out the larger culture, make sure people never watched movies or network TV or read magazines or got on the internet. Some churches have tried that, but by this time most have recognized that really doesn't work. The ones that still try to make you feel guilty for questioning what they teach have to make you feel guilty for using your mind at all, which explains why there's a major strand of anti-intellectualism in evangelical Christianity today—you know, as if not using your mind, not asking too many questions, will keep you safe.

But it's a losing strategy, because one of the things the larger culture gets you to take for granted, is that you have to question the authority of religion. It's an interesting twist, but a very important feature of our social life today: it's taken for granted in American society, especially in the media and the major educational institutions like universities, that religion must not be taken for granted. We must not question the fact that every good person questions their religious beliefs. And you will be made to feel like a bad person if you don't question your own religious beliefs. (You're narrow minded, afraid to step outside of your comfort zone—now there's a great cliché—afraid to think outside the box, and so on—all sorts of taken-for-granted clichés will be used like weapons against you, until you agree there must be something wrong with you. "What's wrong with you?" That's the marker that you're questioning the taken for granted).

I figure many of you have experienced this kind of double bind, where you feel guilty for questioning what you were taught to believe in church, but you also feel guilty for not questioning it. Your church makes you feel guilty for the one thing, and society makes you feel guilty for the other. Very nasty double bind, and bad for your psychological health. So often people escape from this double bind by taking the path of least resistance and opting for the more

socially-accepted set of taken-for-granted beliefs, which is not that of the churches. The churches just don't have the social and cultural power of the larger society: they don't make network TV shows and Hollywood movies and video games, though sometimes they try to co-opt them or make pathetic imitations of them, which explains why consumerist ethics itself plays such a large role in our churches and we get phenomena like churches that seem to be a form of entertainment.

**The Option of Critical Thinking** But I think there *is* a third option. You can try with all your might to ignore every question that comes into your mind about what your church teaches, or you can cave in and take for granted what society insists you take for granted, which means you have to question everything your church teaches and not take it too seriously (people who take their religion too seriously are dangerous fanatics, like terrorists). Or you can do a third thing. You can learn to think. You can learn to think critically about the taken-for-granted. You can even learn to think as a Christian, not buying into the clichés that say faith means not questioning anything, not using your mind, not looking for reasons. For contrary to the clichés, I think Christian faith can stand up to critical questioning. So Christians don't need to be afraid to question the assumptions of their own faith. It's the assumptions of the larger culture, such as consumerism, that stand to lose out when Christians learn to think critically.

The fact that Christian faith can stand up to critical questioning has a lot to do, of course, with the fact that it's true. But in addition, it turns out that Christians have been questioning the assumptions of their own faith, not simply taking them for granted, for about two thousand years. The name for this questioning, sustained by a serious belief in the truth of the Christian faith, is Christian theology. Learning how this history of critical thinking about the faith goes is one of the best reasons to come to a place like Eastern University—so you're not stuck taking for granted everything that's taught either in church or in society. If you do feel like you're in that double bind, where you feel guilty for questioning what you were taught in church and feel guilty for not questioning it, then the thing to do is study theology and—I would add—also philosophy, at a place like Eastern. You've got four years or so here. Take advantage.

Learning to think critically means you're not at the mercy of the clichés. It does take courage, like any other worthwhile adventure. And, like any adventure, it does have its risks. Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean you're automatically guaranteed to get it right. Still, it's worth the risk. And I think the option of not asking questions, not thinking critically, not using your mind, is more likely to lead to bad consequences in the end, to a morally impoverished life, where your inability to question what's in your heart leads you to be ungenerous to others, unkind, not only narrow-minded but closed-hearted. Those are worse risks than the ones you take by learning to think critically. It's impossible to live without risks, folks, so the real question is which are the best risks to take.

**Questioning Consumerist Cliches** What I want to do this morning, of course, is primarily to question what consumer society takes for granted. Questioning what the churches teach—and discovering why most of it can stand up to critical questioning—is what I primarily do in my classes. But it's fun every once in a while to relax and take it easy and question what really can't stand up to questioning—to question things like consumerism. I say it's easy, but that's only after you get over that initial hurdle, that moment when you feel deep in your heart, "what's wrong with me?" That's your sign, I'm suggesting, that you're going to need a little

courage, because the clichés you're questioning are socially powerful, which means they are also present deep down in your own heart.

I'm suggesting that by and large, we shouldn't move on with our lives, that we shouldn't step outside our comfort zones, that we shouldn't think outside the box. See how nearly impossible it is to question the taken for granted without sounding, even to yourself, like there's something wrong with you? But as soon as you have the courage to question it, I think, the power of it fades away like smoke on the wind, because unlike Christian faith, it has no ability to give reasons for itself.

**A Thought Experiment** To test the power of the taken-for-granted in consumerism—and to see why it is so much more powerful than the teachings of the churches in our society—try this little thought experiment. Imagine not buying any Christmas presents this year. Just imagine that you gather round the tree this Christmas and you don't give anyone anything. Or is that unimaginable? Unthinkable. You just couldn't do that. You'd have to be—I don't know, Jewish, or poor, or something (you know, sort of like Joseph and Mary). No normal person would do that. Would they? Just imagine how guilty it would make you feel, how worthless. People would be angry at you, and you might even find yourself agreeing with them. What a rotten thing to do!

And then compare this with how guilty you would feel if, say, you didn't go to church on Christmas. Compare the level of guilt: how guilty would you feel not giving presents? How guilty would you feel not going to church? You know, I bet lots of us have in fact not gone to church on some Sundays, even on some Christmases, without feeling very guilty for it. But have we even dared to think about not buying presents? Have we even dared to question the consumerist obligation to do our Christmas shopping?

Interestingly, at most universities, the answer would be no, but at Eastern it may different. If you've been involved in the YACHT club or the Simple Way, you may have run into people who are actively questioning our need to do our Christmas shopping. They're rather good at questioning the taken-for-granted there on Potter Street, at the Simple Way. But that's why they're called radicals. They look a little crazy, going out on last Friday to the malls, the day after Thanksgiving—you know, black Friday, it's called, because it's the biggest shopping day in the year, the day when many businesses go into the black for the first time, after which they are making a profit for the rest of the year—they look a little crazy going out on black Friday and doing skits at the mall suggesting to people that they celebrate Buy Nothing Day instead. As if they don't really *have* to go shopping. As if it wasn't really an obligation. People look at them like: You must be joking! And that is, I suppose, why the Simple Way folk often do a fair amount of clowning. Better to make yourself look like a fool than like some cruel religious fanatic who doesn't like Christmas presents and Santa Claus and the smiles of the children around the Christmas tree opening a ton of presents. At least if you look like a clown you might get people to listen, just for the fun of it, rather than dismiss you right away as some kind of creep.

Funny thing happens when you question the taken-for-granted. All sorts of new and interesting questions come up for the first time. Like, for instance: where in the world did we get the idea that we have so powerful an obligation to buy Christmas presents? It's down deep in our hearts—most of us Christians would feel far more guilty not doing our Christmas shopping than we would not going to church—and yet how did it get there? No institution forced us to believe this, there was no Spanish inquisition terrorizing us into renouncing the heresy of not believing

in Santa Claus, and yet we are terrorized, intimidated. We would be terrified not to keep our consumerist obligation to buy lots and lots of presents for Christmas. How enormously effective is the ethics of consumerism, which gets millions of people to make shopping for a ton of unnecessary purchases into an obligation more important than their own religion. Fail to question your own religion, and you are made to feel like a narrow-minded bigot. But dare to question your obligation as a consumer, and you are made to feel like a stingy, hard-hearted scrooge. But who's making you feel like that? What are the cultural mechanisms of power here? How does the ethics of consumerism get so deep into our hearts?

Well, of course part of it is peer pressure, in a very broad sense which includes pressure from our families. But I think that wouldn't last if there weren't something else operating, which is so obvious that we hardly see it any more (the obvious is like that, as you realize. It's what you see every day but learn to ignore). And that is the massive role of advertising in our culture. For of course while every advertisement is advertising a different product, all of them are telling us that we have to buy *something*, that our life will be a dingy failure if we don't, that buying things is the way to the good life, the way to fulfillment, the way to become the kind of person that other people envy—and certainly the way to have a good Christmas. That omnipresent message of advertising is like the atmosphere we walk and breathe in, as obvious and invisible to us as the air. And just like the air gets deep into our lungs, the ethics of consumerism gets deep into our hearts. We might even try to question the ethics of consumerism that presses itself upon us with every ad that gets into our ears and eyes, but that's like questioning the pollutants in our air. You can do it, and you can even start a campaign against it, but you still have to breathe, and every breath affects you. We don't have a choice about being consumers, any more than my son Jacob had a choice to love that one toy he first got under the tree so long ago. We have to fight the culture from within it, which means we will look like narrow minded fanatics or old curmudgeons and scrooges, or at best like clowns (I think the Simple Way really does have a good idea there).

**Love vs. Desire** Meanwhile, it is also good to get a good analysis of the pollutants, to find out what poisons we're taking in with the air we breathe. I'm suggesting today that the name for that poison is not "love of *things*." Not exactly. There's nothing wrong with loving things, because God made things. Every pleasant little toy, every pretty doll, every fun thing, came into being not just because of its human maker but because of God the creator. There's nothing wrong with loving *things*, and indeed I think we don't love things enough, not nearly enough. That's one of the central things consumerism deprives us of, I'm suggesting. It teaches us not to love things but to desire them, which is to say, it teaches us not to cling with love to old and familiar things but always to seek new things, new toys, new objects of desire. To cling to old and familiar things is to stay within your comfort zone, and we all know how bad that is (don't dare to question that cliché!).

You can see why this difference between love and desire is so important in the culture of consumerism. If you cling with love to old and familiar things, you won't buy so many new and different things, and that's bad for the economy. You must be required to get new things all the time. That's what Christmas is for, economically speaking. And that's why my little son Jacob must not be allowed to spend too much time with one new toy before another is shoved into his hands. He must learn that what Christmas is about is getting more and more new stuff, world without end. What you have is never as good as what you want to get next. And that's how you're supposed to want it. You're supposed to look forward to that. It's important to get to the

kids early and make sure they don't form strong attachments to old and familiar things, like Laura Ingall's old doll. Kids are prone to do that, if you don't train them up right. And that's why we have Christmas the way we do. That's why we are *required* to have Christmas the way we do, and are made to feel like bad people if we don't put lots and lots of presents under the tree for our children.

But have you ever looked at a roomful of presents on the day after Christmas and been depressed? I have. I remember one Christmas recently when my nephew was about three years old, opening present after present that he had no use for, and they were piled higher and higher, until the room was full of them: big, bright, colorful plastic things that he would use for a little while and then forget. Would he ever care about *any* of them? Would he ever love any of these things? It doesn't look like it.

**Shallow Attachments: Things** Consumerism teaches us to have shallow attachments and therefore shallow feelings. But at the same time it teaches us that our feelings are what it's all about. It aims to stimulate our desires and feelings, all the time, so that we never stick with anything for very long. So our life is all about our feelings, consumer ethics teaches us, and our feelings are easily changed, easily re-directed to desire the latest new thing. We are trained to have superficial and transient attachments, and much of this training is compulsory.

Imagine some bizarre person who gets attached to their computer, or their old, outdated software. "What, you don't want the latest update from Microsoft? But it's so much more convenient. What's wrong with you?" Of course, you're not supposed to say that the old and familiar might in fact be more convenient, you know how it works, and it's nice not to have to make the effort all the time to master whatever new tricks Microsoft insists on sending your way. No, you can't just stay in your comfort zone—*you have to sacrifice for the sake of convenience*! I think you will find this happens more and more in your life. You will have an obligation to sacrifice a great deal of what is comfortable and familiar, what you're attached to, for the sake of convenience. Can't just stay inside your comfort zone. To accept what's more convenient is an obligation, no matter how inconvenient it is to you. If you didn't, how would the people at Microsoft make a living?

I think you'll find that the realm of convenient things that you must accept, no matter how inconvenient, will be keep increasing in size and taking over larger areas of your life. Above all, the number of things that you take good care of, maintain and repair rather than throw away, will be ever on the decrease. Dr. Margaret Kim Peterson, in her recent book on housekeeping, draws our attention to how little we do these days in the way of mending clothes, sewing on patches, darning socks, and so on. To a large extent, this is not something we have a choice about. For most consumer items, it's more expensive to fix old things than to buy new ones. But even things that once could have been fixed can't be anymore. You know people used to mend socks—darning socks, it was called. But with the way socks are made with elastic nowadays *can't* darn them, Dr. Peterson points out. So you don't have an alternative. No one darns socks anymore. We have to just throw them away and get new socks. No point in getting too attached to old socks, after all.

The point is that there is less and less that we will be encouraged, or even allowed, to be attached to. Children around the Christmas tree are not allowed to get too attached to one toy before they must move on to the next, and long before they have grown up they have learned their lesson and are eager for the next present and disappointed when there's no more. Now that's a good consumer!

**Shallow Attachments: Relationships**. But it's not just shallow attachments to *things*. The cliché that you have to move on was originally invented for something more serious: relationships. Isn't that so? You have to move on in your life after a relationship has ended, right? How many times has *that* lesson been taught on TV and the movies? If you can't move on, there's something wrong with you. You must learn to be the kind of person who leaves old relationships behind. It won't do, in a consumer society, to get attached to people as if you were meant to be with them your whole life. You have to learn not to be like that, have to learn not to be monogamous. Because, after all, so many of our emotions do want to stay in that comfort zone for the rest of our lives, that place we call home, and to stay tied down to someone with whom we wish to remain until death do us part. It takes a lot of work to unlearn that, but the ethics of consumerism assures us it's worth it, it's healthy, it's what we have to do—no matter how inconvenient. And so by the time they get married, most people in our culture—including most Christians—already know how to move on from old relationships. They've practiced it many times. They go into marriage emotionally ready for divorce, and equipped with the clichés they need to make it sound obvious that they shouldn't resist the need for divorce when the time comes. What's the matter, afraid to step out of that comfort zone? What's wrong with you? You have to know when to move on.

**Love as a Virtue** So we are trained to have superficial attachments to people, not just to things—to move on from old relationships that aren't working, rather than trying to mend them. We are of course supposed to want relationships, but not be stuck on them. To desire, but not to love—not if love is taken to mean, as it traditionally has meant, faithfulness and constancy. Wonderful word, constancy. A beautiful thing, but no longer in our vocabulary. One of the ways the taken-for-granted gets its power over our hearts is to make us forget that there is any other way to think and feel, or to label that older way of thinking and feeling in some negative way: afraid to get out of your comfort zone, afraid to move on, etc. What would it look like if staying in one place were a good thing? What would it look like if constancy were a virtue?

Indeed, what would it look like if there *were* such things as virtues—another forgotten word. For virtues are by their very nature constant. They are enduring qualities or habits of the heart, and like habits or skills they don't just disappear overnight. To have a virtue like courage, generosity or kindness, is to be that way for the long haul, not just for a moment. Thus every virtue involves a certain amount of constancy.

Especially the virtue called love. Love is more than desire because desire can be here one moment and gone the next, whereas love is not a thing of the moment. This is practically unimaginable in consumer society, so let me dwell on this a bit. Consumerism teaches us that our lives are all about our feelings, but it teaches us our attachments are supposed to be easily changed, what I'm saying is shallow and transitory. So consumerist ethics means believing that love is the greatest feeling in the world, but also being willing to move on when the feeling is gone. "You can't pretend. If the feeling is gone, the love is gone. Right?" How can we not believe that? (The inability to see any other option is a key feature of the power of the taken for granted).

I have heard a fair number of students try to come up with an alternative and fail. A particularly important attempt is to say that love is not a feeling, it's a choice. But watch out: there's nothing that consumer ethics is more happy about than making sure you have a choice! Like desire, like feelings, choice is a thing of the moment, easily changed. If love is a choice,

then I can choose to love you one day and then choose to move on the next. And while it lasted it was true love, for I made the choice. This is no better than thinking that it was only love for as long as the feeling lasted. What it leaves out is the whole dimension of constancy over time. Love, by its very nature, involves faithfulness and therefore constancy. It is more like a virtue or an enduring habit of the heart than like a choice or a feeling. It is an enduring habit of making certain kinds of choices and indeed feeling certain kinds of feelings. But choices come and go and feelings fluctuate, while the habit endures—it is constant. This is why love does not mean that you always have the same feelings—for then when the feeling is gone, the love is gone. No, feelings fluctuate. That's how it goes with feelings. Feelings are not constant, virtues are. (That's why you needn't be particularly worried if your feelings are like a roller-coaster. Well, feelings are like that sometimes.) If you love someone, well, sometimes you get angry at them, sometimes you get disappointed, sometimes you get exhausted and even need a break from them. Think about a mother with young children. She can get exhausted, angry, need to get away from them for a while. But these are temporary things. Her love for them endures.

The point is this. A deep attachment to someone is marked by its constancy, not its intensity at any one moment. What you may feel most intensely at the moment is anger or exhaustion. But the love is what endures. And it does involve emotion of course. Think of a mother who gets tired and angry at her children, but who will be there for them for the rest of their lives, and who is often overcome by waves of tenderness for her children. (The first time you have you own child sleeping in your arms you will know what I mean). Deep attachments, strong love, is not measured by its intensity at any one moment but by how it lasts over time, by its constancy.

**The Same Old Self**. Now here's another point. Constancy requires that we remain one and the same self over the course of time. This is something that consumer ethics really wants us to think is a bad thing. What you are supposed to want, as often as possible, is an extreme makeover, a brand new self with brand new needs and desires—an infinitely changeable and malleable self, available for an infinite number of new things to desire. You see it on the cover of the magazines practically every time you're at the grocery store checkout: "Get the body you've always wanted" is the one that really strikes at you. But this is how we're supposed to think about our whole selves, not just our bodies. All the books in the self-help section of the bookstore promise, right there on the cover: This book will change your life! This will transform you! Of course, that assumes that we're always in a market for a new life, a new self, a new body. We shop for methods of transformation, new selves to buy. Because, of course, there must be something wrong with you if you don't want to be transformed. There's the mark of the taken-for-granted again: there's something wrong with you if you question it. Here the point is, you should feel guilty for embracing anything like constancy in your life.

Here I need to deal with the fact that the ethics and language of consumerism has become a major part of how the churches try to sell themselves. They too promise transformation. Just like the self-help books, the books on spirituality all promise to change your life. They're all competing for your attention by promising that they can give you the most extreme makeover around. It would be radical, or else something like a joke, a piece of clowning, for a book or a church to promise to help you stay the same. But of course that is precisely what you need if you are to stay married to the same old person, rather than transforming your relationships by getting divorced. It's interesting that this talk of change and transformation seldom gets around to noticing that there are lots of changes for the worse.

The churches didn't always use to be like this. Through most of Christian history the emphasis was indeed on faithfulness, constancy, stability in life rather than constant change. God himself was understood to be unchangeable, never changing for the worse, never failing to keep his word, never taking back his covenant promise. But now God is just one more way to change your life, and its doubtful that he's any more effective than all the other change agents on offer in the marketplace of extreme makeovers. In our society changing your life is easy. It's constancy that's hard. Finding someone new is what it's all about. Remaining in a love that endures—that was never so easy, but consumer ethics makes it hard for us even to see that as a good thing.

The best things in life do not change. In a good marriage two people grow old together, and their bodies indeed have changed dramatically over the course of the years, aging and eventually breaking down and dying, but it is the same marriage at the end as at the beginning, an image of the constancy of God who does not change or grow old or die. In this respect, as in many others, Virtue is the art of staying the same.

That does not mean that there is no such thing as good changes, of course, or even sudden dramatic transformations for the better. That is what happens in a conversion to Christ, of course. But that is only the beginning of the Christian life. The real transformation takes many, many years, and a great deal of constancy, like working at a beautiful marble statue that takes years and years to complete. Every day you come into the workshop and chip away at it here or there—you have to keep at it constantly, every day, faithfully—but in the end, after years have gone by, the statue looks very different from the rough block of stone with which you started. The best transformations take time and constancy.

It's important to be able to imagine that, to conceive of it despite the powerful clichés that try to make it inconceivable to us. The ethics of consumerism wants to make it hard for us to imagine that staying the same could be a good thing, and might even be the basis for the real transformation for the good that we long for. Let me conclude by offering you two more images to help us imagine why constancy, staying the same and loving the same things are the way to the transformation for the better that God promises us.

**Bot** It turns out that my son Jacob really did get attached to a favorite toy. It was a little Winnie-the-Pooh bear about so big, small enough for him to hold in one hand while he sucked his thumb and twiddled with the tag with his little finger. He carried that thing around for years and years, until it got really old and raggedy. But of course he wouldn't trade it in for something newer. He was attached to that thing, and it wasn't a shallow attachement.

People would talk to him about his Pooh bear, but he didn't understand, because he never called it a Pooh. He called it "Bot," I think because when he got it he was so young, he had a vocabulary of about 12 words, and one of them was "bot," which he used for anything he could hold in his hand, like a bottle. So he called his bottle "bot," and he called his little Pooh bear "bot" as well. And that's what we all called it, for years and years, long after he knew the words for bottle and bear and so on. And he knew the Winnie the Pooh stories, but he never called "bot" by that name. This wasn't Pooh, this was Bot. And we had to explain to friends and visitors who asked Jacob about his Pooh bear, "oh this isn't Pooh, it's Bot." After all, Pooh bears can be manufactured by the millions. But there's only one Bot.

This raggedly old thing, which Jacob has loved for so long, is a Bot, and only Jacob can make a Bot. It takes that kind of love and constancy, Jacob's kind. For those of you who know the story of the Velveteen Rabbit, it's that kind of love, the kind that makes a toy animal real.

Now that's a transformation. But it takes time, and great constancy. And it is also, not accidentally, very good practice for forming friendships that are deep and constant, marked by lasting love. That's the kind of transformation that constancy in love works in us—you can see it in my son and his friendships.

**Who is the Grinch?** And then there's the constancy of God. What better illustration of this could there be than Christmas itself? Every year it's the same old thing: the same story, the same baby, the same old manger—that never changes—and then the same old shepherds and the same angels. And then the same Christmas carols that we sing, every year. How is it we don't get tired of that? At my age you start to long to hear them, coming around again every year, and you are surprised by how often you weep at them. How is that?

So many things that we love to do, over and over again, the same thing every year. Like reading *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. I love that book. I read it aloud every year and everybody puts up with me as I use the same Grinch-voice and Cindy-Lou-Who voice every year. And I love the question that the book implicitly asks us, and how it undermines the consumerism of commercial Christmas: what would happen if the Grinch came round and stole our Christmas? Would we still have something to sing about without all the tinsel and the trappings, the presents, the boxes and bags? What *are* those Whos singing about, anyways? Surely it's not just "Da-Who Doores, Wa-Who Doores" etc. There's something else going on here.

Well, I made a discovery a few years back. You go to the front of the book and, in some editions at least, you will that Dr. Seuss's real name is Theodore S. Geisel, born 1904. And then you notice that the book was published in 1957, when he was 53. And for anyone who reads the book aloud every year, that rings a bell. "Why for 53 years I've put up with it now…." says the Grinch. Would you believe it—the Grinch is Dr. Seuss himself! He's the one who wants to ask us this question, God bless him: aren't you sometimes just a little sick and tired of all this stuff we get for Christmas, isn't it quite a bit more than we should desire? And what's there to love about Christmas if all that stuff isn't there? Would we still be singing without it?

Well, Dr. Seuss already has his answer. Among the very poor of the world, people like Joseph and Mary, of whom there are today many millions, Christmas has always been celebrated without presents. And yet they do celebrate Christmas by the millions, and they sing. We can sing with them. And they can be our illustration that there is something to sing about even when there are no presents on Christmas day. And maybe they will even give us the courage someday to free ourselves from the Christmas-shopping thing, like some clowns we know.

There is something to sing about, every year, on Christmas. It's the same old thing, in fact. The same old manger, same shepherds, same angels, and the same baby waiting for us every year to come to Bethlehem and see him, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. Surely that's what the Whos are singing about—the real Whos, not the ones in the cartoon. The Grinch came long ago and took their presents, their boxes and bags, their ribbons and tags. So they're singing about the Christmas the Grinch can't steal. And that's the same old, same old.

The same old Christmas, unchanged in its essentials every year, is what changes us over the long haul: the same old story, which is the Gospel, those same carols and songs, inviting us to come to Bethlehem and see the same old baby, Jesus Christ, who makes all things new and transforms us also, slowly but surely, into his own image. A lifetime of Christmases, of constancy in hearing this story and singing these songs and embracing this child—a deep and

lasting attachment, not a shallow and transitory one—will make the difference in the long run, changing a hard block of stone to a living portrait of the image of God.

So I think that all those Whos down in Whoville were not singing Da-Who Doores on that Christmas morning, but something more familiar, older and more meaningful, one of those same old things that we all sing every year, which do indeed give people a reason to sing on Christmas day even when there are no presents and no feast. We all know these songs, we keep singing them every year, unchanging; they're there to remind us of the Christmas the Grinch can't steal, and they're so close to us we have them by heart. Let me remind you, and then please help me out. Here is why there's something to sing about on Christmas.

O Come, all ye faithful. . . .