

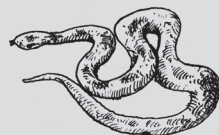
Chapter 8.

CONSUMERISM... with a Serpent

*“The serpent seduces,
his questions lead to death,
both earthly and spiritual.
Jesus invites,
calling us to follow and to serve,
his actions lead us to life in fullness.”*

In The World of Whispers

There is a serpent in the speakers
of my TV,
radio,
laptop,
phone.
I can hear its hiss
running beneath every
show,
song,
clip,
chat.



This hissssss –
a subtle, insistent whisper:
...*buy, buy,*
buy an iPod, buy an MG, buy a PC,
buy an Apple and you will be like God,
buy, buy...

And I – too late – feel the fangs
pierce the thin skin of my will.
And I can feel the venom
poisoning
every choice I make,
...*buy, buy...*
but I
lie as still as I can.
Still.
Still listening.
Listening
for that *other* whisper –
that still, small voice.

The Serpent's Seduction

by Mark Sayers – Author of *The Trouble with Paris* and *The Vertical Self*. Senior Leader of Red Church and specialist in pop culture from a Christian viewpoint.

There are the traditional groupings that zoologists use to categorise animals. Then there are those almost subconscious ways that we classify animals according to what we perceive as their morality. For example we see puppies and bunny rabbits as inherently good, whereas on the other hand sharks and spiders are evil. This process is of course rather silly. When a dog attacks a small child we are surprised, but such incidents reveal not just the wildness of our animals, but also the way in which we apply lashings of humanity over them. We coat them with our anthropomorphic wishes. Yet they remain animals.

One animal that has universally been linked to evil is the snake. Its mere movement can create revulsion. It is little wonder that in the book of Genesis we find that the serpent is the creature which creates the first fissure in creation, a crack that will expand into the force of evil that will break the cosmos. Despite carrying an impressive armoury of venom and fangs, the danger behind the serpent in the garden is not his force of violence, but rather the implications of his seemingly benign question. A question which has the potential to render creation asunder.

The serpent seems perfectly formed to ask the dangerous question. Snakes by their nature are cold, their scales the opposite of warm human flesh. Warmth to us conveys emotions, the texture of human skin invites. However the coldness of the snake's scales repels. We equate coldness or coolness with the ability to be rational, level headed and unencumbered by emotions.

The serpent sits still, or moves silently observing the world through its emotionless eyes. The snake seems the perfect candidate to step back from relationship with God, to be in the position to question God's goodness. A serpent standing up even looks like a question mark and so

the serpent asks:

“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Genesis 3:1.

The serpent’s dangerous question rattles Adam and Eve, who up to this point have not questioned God’s goodness. Anxiety enters into Eden. It is precisely this anxiety which provides the fertilizer for evil to take root. Theologian Walter Brueggemann notes the link between the serpent’s anxiety raising question and the consumer culture in which we live. Each day we are exposed to thousands of marketing messages, advertisements and slogans, each questioning the current goodness of our lives, each creating an anxiety in us that what we have is not enough. Each proposing a mirage-like future, one only achieved by purchasing the right product or experience.

In the culture of consumerism, we can also hear the serpent’s invitation to become like gods. Supermodels stare back at us from billboards with their otherworldly beauty. Creams promise to beat aging, exercise equipment creates the illusion that we can stave off the decaying of our bodies, and achieve immortality. Perfect families of demigods in designer casual wear eat together in their heavenly homes, glancing out from billboards at us with serpentine eyes, inviting us into this ancient seduction. And so like Adam and Eve we fall, we cannot but be seduced by the sheen and shine.

God’s shocking response to this act of seduction is to move in an opposite direction. Whilst the serpent’s question was an invitation for humans to become like gods – God becomes human. Whilst we are seduced by our culture’s promise of a regal life of entertainment and pleasure – God gives up his royal place of privilege to be born amongst straw and manure. Through our purchases we seek unfettered freedom and

cosmic autonomy – God reduces and lowers himself, taking the place of a servant. We try and beat death by buying more stuff – God, who did not live under the curse of mortality, comes and willingly dies on a cross. The serpent seduces, his questions lead to death, both earthly and spiritual – Jesus invites, calling us to follow and to serve, his actions lead us to life in fullness.



Lord,

*Beyond the ads and fads
help us follow your eternal love.*

*Beyond the sparkle and twinkle
help us live your eternal light.*

*Beyond the hot air and current affairs
help us breathe your eternal life.*

*Beyond the hype and hiss
the glam and glitz,
the grin and spin,
help us follow,
help us live,
help us breathe.*

Amen