

I have been reading this for a number of years - my annual checkups that challenge and encourages me, I hope that - I pray that it does the same for you. Take some quiet time with God and read this. Bill

There have been many attempts to trace the path that contemporary American culture is taking, from postmodernism to consumerism to globalization, each catching a part of where society currently is and where it may be heading, but none completely adequate on its own. Indeed, it seems that it will never be possible to find one lens for understanding culture. Yet within each of these concepts, one trend that can be seen throughout society is that of an increasing rationality, termed "McDonaldization" by social critic George Ritzer. He defines McDonaldization as "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world."¹ According to Ritzer, the principles that are spreading from the fast-food environment to the rest of society are efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. Throughout the book *The McDonaldization of Society*, Ritzer thoroughly describes the effects of this process of McDonaldization upon such sectors as the workplace, consumerism, healthcare and entertainment. However, one area noticeably absent in his critique is the Church.

Though Christ "has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,"² the contemporary Church too often resembles the culture around it. Before the Church can begin to be an effective witness for the gospel of Jesus Christ in this age, it must first understand the ideas and systems in society that are determining the direction of contemporary culture. In this case, the Church must discern where the principles of McDonaldization have invaded its walls to the exclusion of a Holy God mankind cannot control, of the Holy Spirit who guides the followers of Christ in new and exciting directions, and of a theology of personhood filled with the Imago Dei. Followers of Christ have a unique and

¹ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, revised ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004), 1.

² Col 1:13. All Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version.

powerful opportunity to live out sacrificial lives in stark contrast to the rationalized society around them. In this trend of McDonaldization, the Church can begin to give a renewed and redeemed vision of a Kingdom life.

Ritzer's first characteristic of McDonaldization in society is efficiency, which he defines as "choosing the optimum means to a given end."³ Because there are many factors in the world that still remain out of human control, organizations continually search and strive for the most efficient means. From shopping and cooking to healthcare and entertainment, America is continually in pursuit of the most streamlined way of living life. This idea of efficiency is directly linked "to the seeming increase in the pace of life."⁴ The more society becomes used to it, the more it desires to bring efficiency to every area of life. Though efficiency is not of necessity a negative factor, it becomes such when the efficiency itself becomes the end or the goal. Taken too far, "The world of efficiency and anonymity dehumanizes us. We see people as machines, as tractors, or as issues to protest. We live in an age when machines act like people, and people act like machines. But machines cannot love."⁵ This is especially important in the Church, for the efficiency of our ministry must never take priority over the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Efficiency in the Church can take on many forms, from parking lot flow and service times to formatted prayers and planned evangelism. Again, it is not necessarily wrong to want to be efficient in ministry, but the Church must determine to what extent efficiency is a matter of being a good steward, and to what extent the process has overshadowed the person.

LOVE

PEOPLE

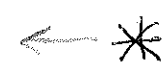
³ Ritzer, 43.

⁴ Ritzer, 43.

⁵ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 301.

Scripture is filled with stories of the unfolding drama of the Lord, reminding one again and again that man is invited to take part in His plans, to be workers and dwellers of His Kingdom, to witness His glory unfold. God promises that “As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand,”⁶ and “so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”⁷ When the Church considers how to do ministry, it must make sure that its priorities reflect those of the Lord. Knowing that His plans will be accomplished, the followers of Christ are free to serve Him with their lives, making their first priority His glory and the human soul, not efficiency. Throughout the gospels, Jesus repeatedly does and says those things that may seem inefficient to the contemporary Church. He tells parables, fully knowing that most of the listeners will not understand. He allows people to walk away from Him. He commends the listening Mary over the working Martha. Sometimes he feeds thousands, and other times he heals one little girl. But always, he loves the people that he encounters.

determine
People's
definition




In her book, *Slow Is Beautiful*, Cecile Andrews calls for a “Slow counterculture”, one that attempts to live an authentic and meaningful life far from the priority of efficiency. Some of the themes she sees emerging from the “Slow Life” are such ideas as authentic knowing versus simply being spoon-fed ideas and opinions, enjoyment over careerism and competition, democracy and participation as opposed to hierarchy, long-term value for the community instead of short-term profits, and a culture of connection overcoming our deepening individuality and loneliness.⁸ In a similar way, the Church can choose values and actions that encourage the body to truly experience authentic discipleship and community. This may mean teaching believers

⁶ Is 14:24.

⁷ Is 55:11.

⁸ Cecile Andrews, *Slow Is Beautiful* (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2006), 215-217.


how to study the Bible, how to apply scriptural principles to life decisions and cultural issues, or how to employ the discernment of the Holy Spirit instead of telling them what to think about specific topics or instead of simply giving them an outlined handout of the Bible. It may call for a renewed vision of the purpose of work and money as means to an end, not an end in itself, allowing more time for the enjoyment of fellowship, family and community. It may mean reincorporating the disappearing and oftentimes frustrating church meetings to discuss needs, even if they do not fit within the defined church plan or mission. And it will certainly renew the Church's commitment to God's grand mission and plan, as opposed to short-term convenience for the ministry. Determining the appropriate place for efficiency within the Church will take much prayer and discernment.

Bible Church
 vs
 Missional
 Community

Ritzer's second characteristic of McDonaldization is calculability, which includes "calculating, counting, quantifying."⁹ This involves setting numerical goals, setting standards that can be numerically tracked, focusing upon quantity over quality. Like efficiency, calculability is not always negative, for oftentimes it allows greater productivity and control over processes. Calculability in the contemporary Church is seen nowhere as often as in the area of church growth. In his discussion of the branding and marketing of the megachurch, James B. Twitchell discusses this quantification in the contemporary church. "Listen to them talk," he writes, "and you will hear a refrain of growth—'We're growing'—as if that were a sign of redemptive success."¹⁰ Twitchell adds that church competition "added the perpetual pressure to stay solvent. That, in turn, always argued for attracting the widest audience, paying attention to the take-away value, and focusing always on the end user while all the time pretending to a

⁹ Ritzer, 66.

¹⁰ James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 80-81.

higher calling.”¹¹ The more often the Church is viewed as a business with a product to sell, the more calculability will play a role. Indeed, it appears that in American society, the only means of measuring success is to give everything numerical value, even the Church, even the salvation of souls. Unfortunately, when churches place too much emphasis upon the amount of seats filled on a given Sunday, the message preached may become sensationalized or diluted in order to encourage more people to walk through the doors.

Again, Scripture provides a different picture of ministry, worship and discipleship. As Luke records the growth of the early church in Acts, the numerical value goes from 120 to 3,000 to 5,000. From there, the amount is no longer given numerical value, but is described as multitudes, increasing, multiplying.¹² The works of the Lord are beyond comprehension. !
 Similarly, Isaiah 40 is filled with terms typically used in quantifying and calculating. For example, Isaiah asks, “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel?”¹³ Yet Isaiah uses these terms to show the absolute immeasurability of the Lord, how completely unquantifiable He is to the human mind. Therefore, the Church must be suspicious of any type of calculability that attempts to contain the work of the Lord within human boundaries and numerical limitations.

This will most likely find specific application in the realm of discipleship. Too often in contemporary churches, many accept Christ or attend church, but few truly learn what it means

¹¹ Twitchell, 56.

¹² This was pointed out by Dr. James MacDonald in a sermon series on Acts at Harvest Bible Chapel, Rolling Meadows, IL during October 2006.

¹³ Is 40:12-13.

to follow Him. In the New Testament, the Lord was more interested in the purity of the Church than He was to the size. Jesus never diluted the message, but spoke repeatedly of sacrifice of both life and comfort, of loving one's neighbor as oneself.¹⁴ Paul, too, encouraged the Church to put out those who were living in disobedience to the gospel of Christ, for the sake of the body. The Church was meant to be holy and set apart, reflecting the Lord it worships.¹⁵ The Church must train up authentic followers of Christ, regardless of the numerical value.

The third characteristic of McDonaldization is predictability, achieved by "discipline, order, systematization, formalization, routine, consistency, and methodical operation."¹⁶ Workplaces, relationships, employees and products all become predictable. Ritzer sees this as a tendency of human nature, desiring the safe and routine, even if it means the sacrifice of wonder and mystery. Predictability is certainly found within the church walls in American society. Most churchgoers know precisely the order of the service, including the approximate length of worship, announcements, prayer and the sermon. Many could predict almost to the minute when they will exit the sanctuary. Church services have too often become routine, structured and rehearsed, and the churchgoers tend to appreciate this. If one tries anything out of the ordinary, it is most likely to be frowned upon. The American churchgoer, just like the general American public, does not want to be surprised.

Unfortunately for this safe churchgoer, the God of Scripture is a God who is constantly calling His children to new and surprising heights. He is a God of miracles and mystery. The Holy Spirit especially stands in contrast to the predictability of the Church. Jesus promises his followers that "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the

¹⁴ See, for example, Luke 10:25-37 and Matt 10:34-39.

¹⁵ See Rom 12:1-2, Col 1:21-23, 2 Tim 2:21.

¹⁶ Ritzer, 86.

Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”¹⁷ Jesus is not safe or tame; therefore, the Church should not expect the working of the Holy Spirit to be predictable either. When the body of Christ gathered, a resurrected Christ showed up at the door, multitudes started speaking in tongues, angels showed up in prison cells, people were healed and demons were exorcised.

In his critique on what he calls “the middle mind,” Curtis White writes that “imagination and thought, art and philosophy, are the things we urgently need if we are ever to confront the performative logic, the imperatives to efficiency and domination, of our culture ... Reawakening the imagination and a capacity for thought is a spiritual and perhaps even a mystical procedure.”¹⁸ The more that the Church chooses predictability, the more mystery and wonder will be lost. This is a frightening picture, for without a right understanding of a fearful and awesome God, the Church will become more ineffective, more conformed to the world around it. Likewise, David Dark sees this as a renewed need for the concept of the apocalyptic, for “Apocalyptic changes everything. Its intense attentiveness to the minute particulars, to the infinity forever passing before our eyes, can leave us feeling ashamed of our ongoing impenetrability to the immediate. It creates an unrest within our minds, and it can only be overcome by imagining differently, by giving in to its aesthetic authority, by letting it invigorate the lazy conscience.”¹⁹ Contemporary society needs to be surprised out of its own complacency. It needs to be shown a picture of the Kingdom of God, the same picture that turned the world

¹⁷ John 16:12-13.

¹⁸ Curtis White, *The Middle Mind* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), 23.

¹⁹ David Dark, *Everyday Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 10.

upside-down in the first century. The people of God need to begin shouting to whoever will listen, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."²⁰

Ritzer's final characteristic of McDonaldization is control, especially through nonhuman technology. He explains that organizations "began reducing people's behavior to a series of machinelike actions. And once people were behaving like machines, they could be replaced with actual machines. The replacement of humans by machines is the ultimate stage in control over people; people can cause no more uncertainty and unpredictability because they are no longer involved, at least directly, in the process."²¹ This idea of control goes hand in hand with the previous discussion of predictability. The more man is able to control his surroundings, the less he will have to deal with the unpredictable and surprising. The less human error comes into the picture, the more efficient he will become. It seems that "We demur out of habit and fright over what not demurring might require of us. We sacrifice our lives out of a feeling that there is some sort of comfort in deferring."²² For this reason, man is too often willing to surrender his control and his rights to himself to anyone or anything that seems to do it more precisely and efficiently.

Throughout Scripture, man is reminded that he is not in control. The Church is to be controlled by only one thing. Paul writes that "the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."²³ It is the good news of the gospel, the love of Christ, that controls the Christ followers. Because this love is beyond measure and unpredictable, the Church must live in complete

²⁰ Eph 5:14.

²¹ Ritzer, 106.

²² White, 4.

²³ 2 Cor 5:14-15.

dependence upon the Lord. As opposed to man's tendency to give up control for the sake of predictability and control, Christ brought freedom. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul exhorts that "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."²⁴ It is only when we give up our control of ourselves and our lives to Christ that we can truly live in freedom.

In his book, *Good News About Injustice*, Gary A. Haugen points out that "God is in the business of using the unlikely to perform the holy ... To build the church of Jesus Christ and to turn the world upside down, God worked through the most unlikely crew of humble women and common fishermen—not many wise, not many powerful, not many noble (1 Corinthians 1:26)."²⁵ It is precisely because they were humble and common that God could use them. The more the Church believes that it has control, the less it can be used by God. It is only when the Church surrenders control to the only One who is perfect that it can participate in the coming Kingdom. Contemporary Christians have too often been tempted by control and power; the Church must realize that its only gain lies in giving these up and allowing God to sweep His children up in the drama of redemption. Practically speaking, for the individual Christian, this may mean an increased dependence upon the Lord in the control of his time, his finances, and his ministry. The Church will need to learn increasingly to depend upon prayer, to learn how to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, and most importantly how to step out in faith.

An example of a life lived out in radical contrast to the values of McDonaldization is found in Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan as recorded in Luke 10. Paul explains the connection between the freedom found in Christ and the call to love one's neighbor. He writes, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for

²⁴ Gal 5:1.

²⁵ Gary A. Haugen, *Good News About Injustice* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 174.

the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”²⁶ In Luke 10, Jesus affirms the answer of a questioning lawyer that the way to inherit eternal life is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”²⁷ In an attempt to justify himself, the lawyer responds by asking him, “And who is my neighbor?” Instead of answering directly, Jesus tells the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan, concluding that the man who proved to truly be a neighbor was the man who showed mercy to the one in need.²⁸

William Barclay reveals the depth and the practicality of this parable, especially pertinent in an age of McDonaldization. Because the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was exceedingly dangerous because of violent bandits, the traveler in the parable was quite foolish to travel alone, something that was rarely done. Barclay points out that the priest was probably unwilling to examine the body of the traveler because if he was dead, according to Jewish law the priest would be unable to participate in religious service for seven days. Barclay also clarifies the behavior of the Levite, who approached and looked at the man, but continued on without helping him. The bandits often used a seemingly wounded man to act the part of a decoy, attacking whoever stopped to help.²⁹ Knowing this background information, the parable takes on even more important meaning. Jesus commends the Samaritan for helping the traveler, even though it appears to have been in part the traveler’s own fault for making a reckless and unwise choice. Also, Jesus shows us that the practical, need-oriented radical help given by the Samaritan is what

²⁶ Gal 5:13-14.

²⁷ Luke 10:27.

²⁸ Luke 10:36-37.

²⁹ William Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1970), 80.

it takes to follow Christ, in contrast to the priest whose first priority seems to have been the religious ceremonies. Finally, Jesus shows us with the example of the Levite that we are required to help the helpless, even when there may be some danger or risk to ourselves.³⁰

Through the example of the Good Samaritan, the Church receives a picture of what it may look like to live outside of the McDonaldization of society. It may have been more efficient for the Samaritan to pay someone to take the traveler to the inn. Instead, “He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.”³¹ He sacrificed his time for the needy. The Samaritan also thought only of the man’s needs. Upon paying the innkeeper, he told him, “Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.”³² The Samaritan showed that mercy and healing is not quantifiable. This example also teaches the Church that ministry and mercy will be unpredictable. As opposed to the fearful Levite, the Samaritan approached the wounded traveler regardless of what might have happened to him. Finally, this parable teaches that the Church must be willing to sacrifice control if it is to truly live out the freedom of loving its neighbor. The Samaritan sacrificed his time, his money and his talents for a situation over which he had no control. Regarding this issue, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life.”³³ If the

³⁰ Barclay, 84.

³¹ Luke 10:34.

³² Luke 10:35.

Church is to truly love its neighbor, it must sacrifice its rights to itself, meaning that it must live in a freedom that cannot coexist with the values of McDonaldization.

In an article entitled “Who Is My Neighbor?” Ian A. McFarland adds another perspective to this concept of loving one’s neighbor. He concludes:

‘neighbor’ is not a category that the lawyer is authorized to apply to others; instead, it takes the form of a challenge and recoils back upon him as a moral agent capable either of being or of failing to be a neighbor to someone else. In this way, Jesus asks lawyer and reader alike to consider the possibility that the question of their own status as neighbors might be anthropologically prior to any reflection on the status of other people.³⁴

In this sense, Jesus seems to completely avoid giving a specific definition of a neighbor. Though the lawyer had initially asked who was meant by the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself, Jesus instead turns the definition upside down, forcing the lawyer to reflect upon his own ability to be a neighbor. McFarland later points out that the lawyer never questioned what one’s duty to one’s neighbor may be, only to whom it is owed.³⁵ The Jews of Jesus’ time knew their obligation to their neighbor but were reluctant to extend this grace and mercy to the Gentiles. This may be why the Parable of the Good Samaritan is oftentimes seemingly tamed in contemporary society. In increasing numbers, the American Church is neglecting discipleship, and thus its members do not even know what is required of them, let alone who their neighbor may be. Thus, it becomes easy to simply accept the system of McDonaldization for its efficient predictability.

God is willing to use man himself to participate in working out His plans, “By using the gifts, resources, relationships, expertise and power that he has given [him]. Because the reason



³³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 35.

³⁴ Ian A. McFarland, “Who Is My Neighbor?: The Good Samaritan As a Source for Theological Anthropology,” *Modern Theology* 17 (January 2001): 60.

³⁵ McFarland, 63.

he has granted us these things is not merely for our joy (though great joy they rightly bring) but so that we might serve those who lack them.”³⁶ Throughout the New Testament, it is understood that the Lord blesses man with time, talents and treasures not for his own sake, but in order that he may use it in building the Kingdom. These gifts and resources are not the end in themselves, but the means to something greater. These, too, like the processes of McDonaldization, have been mistaken for the goal. Writer and social activist Shane Claiborne reminds the disoriented Church that Jesus “fed the thousands, and the next day they were hungry again. But we remember his love. It wasn’t that Jesus healed a leper but that he touched a leper, because no one touched lepers. And the incredible thing about that love is that it now lives inside of us.”³⁷ This seems to be in direct contradiction to the effects of the rationalized society created by McDonaldization. Ritzer explains that “rational systems are unreasonable systems that deny the humanity, the human reason, of the people who work within them or are served by them.”³⁸ This is where the Church must begin to counteract the effects of McDonaldization. In a society continually more enslaved by rational systems to the exclusion of humanity, the Church, like Christ and like the example of the Samaritan, must focus upon the neighbor. It must choose the seemingly irrational to reveal the priority of personhood. *PEOPLE*

Living in the freedom of the Kingdom of God should bring an increased understanding of man’s role as the image-bearer of God. Yet when Christians get caught up within the structures of McDonaldization, they may not only forget who they are and the type of radical life they are called to live, but they may even contribute to the dehumanizing of their neighbor. Ronald J.

³⁶ Haugen, 102.

³⁷ Claiborne, 85.

³⁸ Ritzer, 134.

Sider writes that “fallen supernatural powers work to twist and distort the social systems that we as social beings need in order to be whole ... Evil is far more complex than the wrong choices of individuals. It also lies outside us both in powerfully oppressive social systems and in demonic powers that delight in defying God by corrupting the social systems that God’s human image-bearers need.”³⁹ It would be not just naïve, but foolish for a follower of Christ to let himself be swept along with the tide of culture. He has the unique ability to step outside of himself and his culture to discern the signs of the time in relation to God’s coming Kingdom. He no longer needs to be controlled by the powers of his age. In Scripture, “The passion that drove the early Christians to evangelistic zeal was not fueled just by the desire to increase church membership or to usher people safely into a compensatory heaven after death. Their passion was fired above all by relief at being liberated from the delusions being spun over them by the Powers. Being thus freed determined them to set others free.”⁴⁰ McDonaldization seems to tell man that life should be about his own convenience, comfort and safety. But the Church has a greater story to tell the world. Henri Nouwen writes that “Beneath all the great accomplishments of our time there is a deep current of despair. While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world.”⁴¹ Sadly, as long as the Church aspires to the same goals of society, it too will be plagued by the same diseases. It must choose to step outside of these systems, and embrace a revolutionary life of freedom and sacrifice for the love of the neighbor.

³⁹ Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 81.

⁴⁰ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Galilee, 1998), 200.

⁴¹ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 21, quoted in Barbara J. Elliott, *Street Saints* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation, 2004), 257.

Christ taught that the Church is called to be a radical witness in a fallen world. From his first recorded sermon in Matthew 5-7, Jesus reshaped what it means to follow after God, how His children are to relate to one another, and how they may begin to live out Kingdom lives. His words were hard and surprising, calling man to sacrifice himself for others. Sider points out that “Precisely because we love culture, we must be countercultural. Precisely because we follow Jesus, our churches must be loving disrupters of the sinful status quo rather than comfortable clubs of conformity.”⁴² In order to follow after Christ in a society of McDonaldization, the Church must sacrifice its rights to its own comfort and live out the wonder and mystery of a God it cannot control, but only serve and worship. Shane Claiborne quotes one of his professors who said, “Don’t let the world steal your soul. Being a Christian is about choosing Jesus and deciding to do something incredibly daring with your life.”⁴³ Because the Christian follows a God greater than his own understanding, the life of a Christ follower may appear inefficient and unquantifiable to the culture around him. The life of a Christ follower will be unpredictable, filled with wonder, mystery and dependence upon the Holy Spirit. The life of a Christ follower will reflect a constant release of control. And above all else, the life of a Christ follower will not be his own.

⁴² Sider, 104.

⁴³ Claiborne, 18.

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