



MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

News from Long Gully

The La Niña system has brought us an uncommonly mild summer with good rains and the vegie garden has gone gang-busters. The tomato crop has been harvested and bottled and should supply us for a year – about 70kg worth! But this year we have begun a worrying battle with fruit fly, so we will need to prepare for next season like a military campaign. The garlic is now in the ground, so all the essentials are taken care of.

I am very happy to announce that we have someone to fill the *Manna Matters* Editor role vacated by Matt Anslow. Readers might remember Jacob Garrett's contribution to *Manna Matters* from two editions ago (Oct 2020) where he told the story of his walk from Melbourne to Sydney. Jacob is a graduate in philosophy and ancient history and currently undertaking a Masters in

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Jacob Garrett on his walk from Melbourne to Sydney (or is it Jesus by the shores of Lake Galilee? ...)



A DIFFERENT WAY

A week-long exploration of Christ's call to a new way of living

**14 - 19 November 2021
Bendigo**

Come and spend a week exploring Christian alternatives in areas of money, employment, consumption, sustainability, family, community, care for creation and serving the poor. The week will be hosted by the Seeds community in Long Gully, Bendigo, with input from some of our friends.

Cost: \$100

Registrations close 1 November. Places will be limited, so hurry!

To download registration forms or for more info, check the website:

www.mannagum.org.au

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

Study the Bible together
Reflection and discussion
Get your hands dirty
Meet interesting people
Cook and eat together
Sing & pray

THINGS YOU WILL DISCUSS

Vocation & employment
Sustainable resource use
Hospitality & the poor
Urban living
Community and mission
Money & budgeting

THINGS YOU WILL EXPLORE

Growing food, making compost
Ethical shopping
Community development
Waste
Land care and restoration
Good food!



A Christian Approach to Commerce

by Jonathan Cornford

A few years ago, I wrote a five-part series in *Manna Matters* (Oct 2016 – August 2018) that attempted to theologically describe one of the master processes that shapes world affairs – capitalism. I argued that capitalism represents *a spirit* that is ultimately destructive of life and love and that followers of Jesus are called to walk to the beat of a different drum. But what is ‘capitalism’? It is a controversial term that is often confused and conflated with other things, and especially with the world of commerce and profit. There is no doubt that commerce and profit are central to the operation of global capitalism, but that does not mean they are the same thing. If Christians are called to reject capitalism, does that mean they must also reject commerce?

This is a question that has troubled Christians, on and off, for the last 2000 years. At times, the church has seen commerce in almost wholly negative terms, while at other times it has had almost nothing critical to say about it. In our own time, the fragmentation of the church represents virtually the whole spectrum of these attitudes to commerce. On the whole, however, it seems to me that, irrespective of where we sit on this spectrum, there is real difficulty in trying to think *Christianly* about this realm of life.

As argued in the previous articles, commerce *is not* the child of capitalism, nor is it necessarily captive to it. Commerce is a far, far older phenomenon than capitalism and, indeed, has been fundamental to what we call ‘civilisation’. To this day, it is still possible to engage in commerce in ways that are not beholden to the spirit of capitalism. But it is not easy.

Here I will make an attempt at providing a basic conceptual framework for a serious practice of Christian discipleship while making a living through commerce. These will only be top-level principles and frameworks – the beginning of a discussion that requires much more detail.

Commerce as work

One of the great problems with how we think about commerce is that we tend to see it as an entirely different category of activity from other forms of work. At its most basic level, however, commerce is just one of the ways by which a household seeks to provide for its members. Keeping this in mind is critical if we are to have a healthy view of commerce. I have argued elsewhere (*Manna Matters*, April 2013) that a biblical perspective of work is grounded in, and gives a fundamental dignity to, the reality of the human condition – that we must work (in some shape or form) to sustain ourselves and our families. But the biblical view of work goes much further: the mind-blowing message of the New Testament is that we are, each and every one of us, called and invited, in the deepest sense, to participate in *God’s great work* of healing the world. Thus, while each of us continues to be

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Alongside up-cycling/recycling, Green Collect provides employment and training opportunities for the long-term unemployed, including people who have faced refugee experiences, mental health issues and homelessness.

faced with the basic economic question of how we will materially sustain ourselves, even this basic question has become reframed to consider the question of how we might also, through our work, *serve the world*.

This framework applies to *all work*, whether paid or unpaid, and whether or not others recognise it as 'work'. This should also be the basic framework in which we think about commerce: it just one more way by which we can sustain ourselves, but also, simultaneously, seek to serve the world.

The criteria of beneficial commerce

Whether or not commerce fits within this framework, as with all work generally, is dependent on exactly *what* is being undertaken and *how* it is undertaken. There are some forms of commerce which a follower of Christ should simply never become involved in because they are intrinsically destructive. For the last few hundred years, commercially-minded Christians have tended to draw this category of exemptions very narrowly: as long as it is legal and does not involve slavery, sex, gambling or alcohol, then it is fair game. However, following Christ requires us to see much more deeply, and weigh much more seriously, those things which are not only legal, but considered *normal*, but which nevertheless destroy life. Dorothy Day thought that Christians should not be involved in the advertising industry.

Today, more than ever, we need to give very serious consideration to both the social and the ecological impact of our activities. This must also include not only the visible economic impacts of our actions – such as the impact of predatory real estate investment on housing costs – but also the less tangible aspects

of social, mental and cultural health. In particular, to what extent is a form of commerce just contributing to the vast weight of nihilistic consumerism that is filling our lives with crap and emptying our souls of substance ... not to mention contributing to the mounting ecological cost of this fleeting and frivolous consumption?

That said, that still leaves a vast range of potential commercial activity that could be framed as either ethically neutral, or even beneficial to supplying human needs. Here the question shifts from what is done to *how* it is done. If we take seriously the idea of Christian discipleship in the sphere of commerce, then there are range of things to be considered:

1. *Ethical and pastoral consideration of staff*: a follower of Jesus can never just think of employees as 'human resources'. Employment of someone else's labour is a very thick form of relationship between two people, with high potential for mutual benefit and service or for alienation and exploitation. Considerations of pay, conditions and the general atmosphere and dignity of work should never be left merely to the legal minimum, the market rate or the social norm. Of course, the details of this will vary enormously across sectors, but, in general, a Christian should always endeavour to be as generous and caring an employer as they are able to be.
2. *Environmental sustainability and social responsibility*: just as it is incumbent on each of us as private consumers to take as much care for the social and ecological impact of our consumption, even more so is it critical for businesses to think through how they procure materials and services and how they handle and dispose of waste. Christians should be at the forefront of decreasing the footprint of business.
3. *Service to the customer*: whether or not the provision of certain goods or services to consumers is really a *service* to them is dependent on many factors including, but not limited to, the quality and durability of the good or service, the price point at which it is offered at, the *way* it is offered or sold, and the post-sales service. In the challenges of a competitive marketplace (see below), it is easy for the real needs of the consumer to be forgotten in the drive for profitability.

There is little doubt that thinking about commerce in this way places the Christian at a commercial disadvantage to those who are not troubled by moral considerations. But this should not surprise us – this *should* be the case for Christians in most forms of work. When Jesus said that the road that leads to life is hard and there are few who walk it, he wasn't making idle chit-chat.

Markets, competition and viability

If a business is to supply you with a livelihood, then it must be commercially viable. There have been too many big-hearted Christians who have thought very well about the above considerations, but have not realistically assessed whether: (a) it is actually possible to run a business in the chosen sector with the above concerns *and* be commercially viable; and (b) whether they have the necessary skills and qualities to make this possible. I think it is almost certainly the case that there are some sectors of commerce that are so dominated by the cost-cutting and unethical practices of large corporations that it is simply impossible to behave ethically and responsibly *and* be commercially viable. These areas might, for the time being, need be abandoned with a heavy heart – it is not worth sacrificing one’s self and family against an inevitable wall of commercial failure. Christians are called to live by high ideals while maintaining a brutally clear view of what the world is really like. Jesus’ warning to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves is especially relevant in the world of business.

Herein lies one important area of confusion for Christians thinking about commerce. As we are continually told, business requires *competing* in the marketplace and this naturally creates some discomfort for those seeking to follow the way of self-giving love. Here we need to differentiate between two types of competition:

Jesus’ warning to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves is especially relevant in the world of business.

- (i) the ‘competition’ that takes place within markets; and
- (ii) what can be called ‘rivalrous competition’, where a person or firm is directly seeking their own advantage at someone else’s cost.

Christians are clearly called to abstain from the second of these two things, but what about the first? In this case, ‘competition’ is really a technical term for the operation of price signals within a market; it does not describe your attitude to another person. *All things being equal*, price signals are indeed the most efficient way for distributing goods and services to where they are needed most. In theory at least, ‘competing in the marketplace’ really just describes trying to make a fist of it in the conditions thrown up by the operation of price signals. It does not need to involve ‘rivalrous competition’ and does still allow ample scope for cooperation amongst so-called ‘competitors’.

The trouble is, *all things are rarely equal in markets*, especially in this age of globalised markets dominated by multinational corporations. There are all manner of forces and factors that *distort* markets in certain directions. And this is where wise discernment is required by Christians in the world of commerce. Can they avoid being the *victim* of distorted markets without becoming an *exploiter* of them? If push comes to shove, then the way of Christ is clear: it is better to be a victim than an oppressor.



Kokonut Pacific: a non-capitalist commercial business succeeding in a capitalist business world.

Money, profit and temptation

Now we come to the biggest stumbling block for Christians in business. The basic tool of all commerce is money. As has been discussed previously (May 2015), money is an immensely powerful spiritual force. If it is difficult for anyone in our culture to have a healthy attitude to money, how much more difficult is it for someone who has to count money and balance a ledger at the end of every day? Anyone getting into commerce needs to be good with money – it is the basic tool of the trade – however, to do so healthily requires clarity about the enormous power it exerts over us.

This means that the basic practices Jesus advocated to break the power of money – renunciation, generosity and gratitude (see *Manna Matters*, May 2016) – become critical for Christians in commerce. But here we should make a distinction between personal finances and those of the business: the primary place to practise these disciplines is in the living that one makes *from* a business and not within the business itself. A business can indeed be generous, as discussed above and below, but only within limits of commercial viability.

The critical question for any Christians in commerce is whether they are simply seeking a good way to make a living and serve the world, or whether they actually desire wealth. Jesus insisted that the desire for wealth is corrosive of life, irrespective of who we are, and thus we actively need to work against it. Thus his strong

language about renouncing wealth.

The dangers of commerce are heightened in this regard. On one hand, entering into business often involves financial risk that the rest of us rarely experience, and thus *the fear of commercial failure* can produce an unhealthy compulsion to ‘secure one’s future’. On the other hand, the *attainment of commercial success* brings temptations of wealth that few others experience. The great challenge for a follower of Jesus in business is to be grounded in the profound sense of gratitude and contentment – the sense of ‘enough’ that seeks only ‘this day our daily bread’ – that characterises the essential economic orientation of the people of God.

Unlike employment, where a wage level is set and must be accepted, the question arises as to what is an acceptable income to derive from the business? There is no reason why we should not bring the same critical questions about our expectations of a material standard of living to a successful business owner as to anyone else. There is no reason why someone who is successful in commerce might not still choose to live more simply than the norm, which I have been arguing over the last 10 years is the great imperative for the people of God in the affluent West. At the nuts and bolts level, the simplest way to do this is to set one’s income from a business as a fixed wage, just like the other employees. That means anything over and above this level – the profit – is delinked from one’s personal gratification.



The Social Foundry: a not-for-profit social enterprise in Kyneton, Victoria. In addition to great food and coffee, they offer teaching, encouragement and experience in life skills, the hospitality industry, building trades.



How profitable should a Christian in business be?

As should be clear from the discussion above, the first key issue is how a business makes money in the first place. It is the *drive* for ever-increasing profit that is the source of so much of the bad commercial practice in the world. The first goal of a Christian in business should simply be to provide a sustainable living and to serve the world; the question of profit – the over-and-above of this goal – is secondary. However, assuming a business meets the criteria of beneficial commerce, there should be no qualms about a business being profitable. It is entirely possible, though perhaps less frequent than we would like, for a business to be profitable simply because it provides *a good service* that is highly valued.

The key question, then, for any follower of Christ is, to what ends might legitimate profit be used? If profit is being sought, as is overwhelmingly the expectation in business, for the self-gratification of personal wealth, then it is not the kingdom of God that is being sought. But profits can usefully be employed to make a good business even better, with a very wide scope of meaning for the word ‘better’:

- to provide employment for more people, perhaps even those who otherwise struggle to enter the workforce;

- to improve the conditions (pay, hours, leave, environment, culture, fulfilment, training, etc) for those already employed;
- invested into practices, skills or technologies that decrease the ecological footprint and increase the social benefit of a business;
- to lower the price or improve the product or service for customers;
- invested into supporting other beneficial commercial start-ups;
- philanthropy.

Often, commercially successful Christians skip straight to philanthropy, which certainly has its place, but I suspect is actually the least beneficial of the above options. The key point, however, is that if you are fortunate enough to find yourself the owner of a highly profitable business, there is vast scope to creatively serve the world, if you can only resist the temptation to claim it all to yourself ...

In conclusion, there are good reasons for Christians to become involved in commerce, but they are very different to the reasons why most people engage in this sphere. All complex societies need commerce to operate, but this can be done in ways that are either more or less beneficial. We live in an age when bad commercial practice is driving ecological crisis, economic inequality, nihilistic consumerism, relational breakdown and deep spiritual alienation. How much more so today do we need forms of commerce that build up rather than pull down? But, as in all spheres of life, following the way of Christ in the fallen world of commerce requires a radically counter-cultural approach, which means that it is hard – very hard.

But as numerous stories of everyday people in *Manna Matters* have shown (see the stories of Kokonut Pacific, August 2018; Green Collect, May 2018; the Social Foundry and Cassinia Environmental, May 2020), it is certainly possible.

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Beauty and the Beast

Violence & Economics in the Book of Revelation Part 2: The Beauty

by Matthew Anslow

The Book of Revelation is, as I mentioned in the previous instalment of this series, complex, confusing, and controversial. In that article, I discussed how we might read such a text, outlining what I think are its central historical and literary dimensions in order to provide some context for reading it. I suggested that the book, which was written to communities of early Christians facing oppression and marginalisation, is ‘a text that utilises well-known genres and symbols in order to reveal to its audience God’s perspective on their current situation of suffering and marginalisation’.

From this starting point, I also looked at the figure of the Beast in Revelation 13, showing how it relates to certain Old Testament texts as well as the Roman imperial context of the time. I argued that the Beast represents the military might and violence of the Roman Empire. Revelation’s purpose for using such imagery was to call its audience to endure and resist such violence and to give their allegiance not to the Beast but to Christ, who was crucified by such beastly brutality but was raised from the dead.

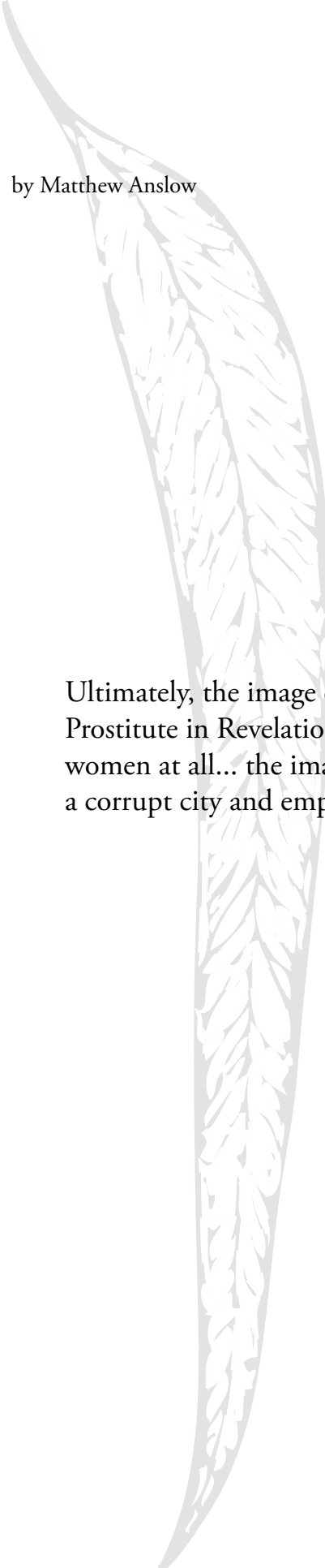
In this next instalment, I wish to turn our attention to the figure of the ‘Great Prostitute’ in Revelation 17–18 and the economic critique it raises.

A Disclaimer

Revelation’s negative use of the image of a prostitute has, in some circles, been controversial for its patriarchal and sexist depiction. Feminist biblical scholar Tina Pippin claims the disembodiment of the Prostitute in Revelation 17:16 ‘points to the ultimate misogynist fantasy!’ Pippin’s point is that these images can be quite dangerous, particularly in the hands of men who can exert power over the bodies of women. Howard-Brook and Gwyther point to the example of the church’s burning of women as ‘witches’ as a consequence of taking such images literally as the word of God.

It will not do, then, for a male like myself simply to say that this language was a product of its time. This would be to pass over, and even excuse, the real pain, violence, and degradation that many women across the world have experienced because of the use and abuse of such scriptural passages.

I wish to begin by acknowledging this pain. Without excusing the problems and historical effects of the text, I hope to show that the images of women used by Revelation were not produced with the intent to legitimise violence against women. Ultimately, the image of the Prostitute in Revelation is not about women at all — as we shall see, *the image represents a corrupt city and empire.*



Ultimately, the image of the Prostitute in Revelation is not about women at all... the image represents a corrupt city and empire.

The Great Prostitute (Revelation 17:1–14)

In terms of the text itself, Revelation describes the ‘Great Prostitute’ as being,

seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk. (17:1–2)

That she is seated on many waters is important. The sea was the paradigmatic symbol of death and chaos throughout Israel’s history (e.g., Noah’s Flood, Exodus’ Red Sea, Jonah’s journey). In a sense, the Prostitute is seated on death itself, the place from which the Beast emerged in 13:1.

The Prostitute is also ‘clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication’. In other words, she is obscenely rich and luxurious and her golden cup is the exact opposite of the golden bowls in heaven (5:8) — the bowls hold the prayers of the saints, but her cup holds abominations.

Further, on the forehead of the Prostitute is written ‘a name, a mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations.”’

What is Revelation’s author trying to achieve with such imagery? The reference to Babylon is reasonably clear: Babylon was the greatest empire of the ancient world and had become the typical, paradigmatic image of empire in Israel’s tradition. The prophetic sections of the Old Testament denounce heavily the political and economic tyranny of Babylon (see, for example, Jeremiah 50:23–27).



A Roman sestertius minted under Vespasian (69-79 AD) depicting the goddess Roma seated upon seven hills.

In Israel’s literature, Babylon eventually came to represent *all* empires opposed to God. For example, most biblical scholars agree that ‘Babel’ in Genesis 11 is an allusion to Babylon (in Hebrew, *Bābel* is the word for Babylon). Babel’s universalising project was thwarted because it was an attempt by humankind to construct an idolatrous empire.

By the time of the late first century CE, Babylon had become a label used in Jewish and Christian circles to refer to *Rome* (see for example 4 Ezra 3:1–2, 28–31; Sibylline Oracles 5.213–218). One of the reasons for this was probably that Rome, like Babylon, had destroyed Jerusalem and its temple.

It is not difficult to see, then, that this Prostitute in Revelation, who is said to be ‘Babylon the great’, represents the Roman Empire. This is further evidenced by the fact that the Prostitute is said to sit on seven mountains (17:9), a well-known reference to Rome, which was built on seven hills. Rome was, after all, the dominating political reality in the world of the New Testament.



The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem by David Roberts (1796-1864), c. 1850.



The Whore Babylon, Revelation 17:1-18 by Matthias Gerung (c. 1500-1570), c. 1530-1532.

The Prostitute as Luxury and Economic Exploitation

Like the Beast, the Prostitute is not simply a generic depiction of the empire. Rather, it is an image that emphasises certain of the empire's characteristics.

If the Beast represents the violence and coercive power of Rome, then the Prostitute, with her ornate clothing and luxurious seductiveness (17:4), represents the economics of the empire that seduces the imaginations of the people, particularly the 'kings of the earth' who fornicate with her (17:2).

We are told of the Prostitute that by her the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk (17:2), and that even John, when confronted by her, is moved to 'marvel greatly' (17:6b). The Greek word for prostitute is *porneuō*, the same word used in the Greek version of Exodus 34:15–16 where the children of Israel are warned not to 'whore' after the gods of the surrounding nations.

The issue in Exodus is not sexual immorality, but the people's idolatry and thus the selling out of the radical message of YHWH, which was distinct from the practices of the other peoples who surrounded the Israelites. As Howard-Brook and Gwyther point out, idolatry was not merely about falling down before this statue or that tree — it was about adopting a cult and culture that was at odds with the covenant YHWH had established with Israel.

This covenant was, at its core, a way of life in faithfulness to the character of YHWH. One of the central concerns of the covenant was economics — the

Israelites are, again and again, commanded to treat each other fairly in their economic dealings.

One of the ways that Israel in the Old Testament was most unfaithful was in its constant entering into alliances with neighbouring empires for protection, thus abandoning their covenant with YHWH. These alliances were both military and economic. That is, they were trading alliances (e.g., Isaiah 23:15–17; Ezekiel 16, esp. 26, 28–29).

Israel, in making such alliances, was being seduced into economic relationships that were contrary to its covenant with YHWH. By connecting Israel's past covenant unfaithfulness with the Prostitute, Revelation's point is reasonably clear: those who capitulate to the Prostitute are committing the same idolatry that Israel had been warned against. Indeed, the entire world has become drunk with the intoxicating and hypnotic seduction of the Prostitute, that is, with imperial economics that conflict with the will of God. In other words, the people have given themselves to a lord other than God, namely the Roman economic system under Caesar.

The Immorality of Kings and Merchants

This is why Revelation goes out of its way to indict the 'kings of the earth' (17:2; 18:9) and 'the merchants of the earth' (18:11–13) — they are the ones who benefit from the seduction of the Prostitute, from the oppressive imperial economic system.

When it is said in Revelation 18 that Babylon (the Prostitute) is fallen, the kings of the earth 'who

committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her' weep and wail (18:9) and the merchants 'weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more' (18:11).

What is Revelation talking about here? Why do the kings of the earth and the merchants weep at the demise of the Prostitute? These extremely powerful members of society were those who had become wealthy because of the oppressive economic system in place in the empire.

It is helpful to have some background into this economic system to fully comprehend why Revelation might be so antagonistic toward it.

While it is not possible to provide a comprehensive explanation, a basic description will aid our understanding.

The Roman Empire was what social scientists call an advanced agrarian society. Such societies came about in part through the invention of certain agricultural technologies, such as ploughs, which made possible surplus production. Surpluses allowed for trade and permanent settlement to occur. It also allowed for the existence of an 'exploiter' class, those who could coerce from agriculturalists the payment of a certain portion of produce.

As time went on, the exploiter class gained more wealth, and thus the power to employ more coercive tactics, such as standing armies. The agriculturalists, on the other hand, became a peasantry. With the rise of elite bureaucracies that were necessary to support this system, the wealthy could begin to keep records, such as debt, and thus debt became perpetual.

Eventually, these exploiting elites became so wealthy that there began to be a demand for rarer luxury goods. This necessitated the creation of a merchant class: people who would travel between settlements transporting luxury goods and selling them for high prices. They would typically buy these from poorer artisans for low prices and sell them to the elite for much more.

In short, advanced agrarian societies were those in which a tiny fraction of the population lived in luxury at the expense of the vast majority, who lived a life of subsistence. The elite worked out numerous ways of extracting all surplus from the peasantry, leaving them with just enough to survive.

The Roman Empire was such a society. Everyone from Caesar and his bureaucracy down to the more well-off merchants made a killing from a system that heavily taxed the majority of rural peasants, leaving them in poverty and constantly at risk of many afflictions and dangers.

It is no wonder, then, that the kings and merchants weep at the fall of Babylon, that is, the Roman Empire and its economic system. Revelation 18:14–17a says:

'The fruit for which your soul longed
has gone from you,
and all your dainties and your splendor
are lost to you,
never to be found again!'

The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud,

'Alas, alas, the great city,
clothed in fine linen,
in purple and scarlet,
adorned with gold,
with jewels, and with pearls!
For in one hour all this wealth has
been laid waste!'

If that system were to fall apart, it would indeed be the kings of the earth and the merchants who would weep. After all, they are the ones who have become rich from it. In Revelation 18:11–13 it is said that,

No one buys their cargo any more, cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.

This list is representative of the trade in commodities at the time, both the luxuries (gold, jewels etc.), but also the staples of life (oil, flour, wheat, cattle) — Babylon extracts *everything* from the entire earth, even human persons.

This is the very system that Revelation critiques when it portrays it as a Prostitute.

The Truth About the Prostitute

It is no surprise that the Prostitute is said in Revelation 17:3 to ride on the Beast — John is aware that the exploitative economic system of the empire is achieved and maintained only by the presence of the Beast, Rome's imperial military and political power. We might remember from the previous article in this series that the 'mark of the Beast' symbolises that those who have not given their allegiance to the Beast, the military power of Rome, are not permitted to participate in the economic system. The two systems are intimately related.

What is Revelation talking about here? Why do the kings of the earth and the merchants weep at the demise of the Prostitute?



The imperial economic system is also held in place by the myths and propaganda controlled by the elites. The nations are indeed drunk on the Prostitute, hypnotised by her seductive myths. She offers them a golden cup, and they drink deeply, to the point of intoxication.

But John's critique is devastating: the cup offered by the Prostitute, despite its seductiveness, is filled with the wine of her impurities. This includes, according to Revelation 17:6, the blood of the saints — the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. The Prostitute may seduce the inhabitants of the earth — indeed, even John is captivated at first (17:6b–7). But the heavenly perspective on her is that her charms are fraudulent, her ornaments are illusions, and she is destined for destruction.

'Come Out of Her, My People!'

Revelation's warning is to avoid the seduction of the Prostitute, who will ultimately come to ruin. Unlike the kings and the merchants, who fornicate with such exploitative systems, Revelation's audience is called not to drink from her cup, but to resist her oppression.

This was apparently a real issue for Revelation's audience. Even if one didn't like the economic system of the Roman Empire, you were nonetheless compelled to place your faith in it. It was easier to accommodate the empire than to resist; to resist was to risk much. The Prostitute is drunk on the blood of the saints for a reason (17:6) — Rome would not allow a group of misfits who followed an unknown crucified prophet from some backwater province called Judea to create instability in its empire.

Nonetheless, the call of God in Revelation is this: 'Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins...' (18:4).

The sexual euphemism is disquieting, perhaps because Revelation's message is drastic. Though the kings and merchants of the earth weep and wail when Babylon falls, those who have come out of her have no need to weep. Revelation calls the people of God to continue to resist the oppressive and exploitative economic system of Rome. It also warns those who have colluded and compromised with Rome to get out of her now.

As Revelation goes on, we find that the people of God are not merely called to come out of Babylon; they are also called also to come *into* the New Jerusalem. This is not a call to move geographically. Rather, it is a call to Revelation's audience to discern the true character of Babylon/Rome and to distance themselves from its seduction by embracing a new way of life. In other words, they are to give their allegiance to an alternative to Rome — God's kingdom of justice and peace — and to create alternatives in fitting with this kingdom.

Despite the vast differences in experience between the original audiences of Revelation and modern Christians, it is not difficult to draw parallels between the demands placed on them and on us. Today's global economic system is more obscene and filled with more baubles and trinkets than the author of Revelation could ever have imagined. Revelation's warnings against being hypnotised by the 'Prostitute' are perhaps more relevant than ever.

We have not the space here to proceed into an in-depth critique of our own economic situations in light of Revelation's message. I trust, though, that this explanation of the book's economic critique will spawn hearty reflection and conversations. In the next and final instalment of this series, we will turn our attention to Revelation's alternative to the Beauty and the Beast, namely its image of the slain Lamb.

Until then, may you continue to wrestle with the implicit question posed by the Book of Revelation: *How can the Church truly be the Church in the face of a powerful and seductive empire?*

Dr. Matthew Anslow is Educator for Lay Ministry in the Uniting Church Synod of NSW/ACT. He's married to Ashlee and, together with their three young children, they live at Milk and Honey Farm, two hours west of Sydney.



The New Jerusalem by Gustave Doré (1832-1883), 1865.

Mendifesto

Caring for Broken Things in a Broken World

by Phoebe Garrett

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

It's happened to all of us, in some form or another. Your heart sinks as you hear a ripping sound, feel an unexpected tug where your favourite jacket has caught on a branch. Hoping you are wrong, you shrug off the garment to check the damage. Sure enough, there is a large hole torn in the fabric.

The Bible continually warns us not to become attached to material possessions. Love of money and possessions keeps us from loving God and humans are inclined to love money and possessions too much, when they ultimately mean nothing:

I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners... Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands. (Ecclesiastes 5:13, 15)

Moth and rust may destroy our material possessions, but considering them disposable *spiritually* does not mean considering them as disposable *physically*. Rather, an effort to conserve and repair our possessions recognises the value of the God-given resources that went into their production.

If you're new to making repairs which require more than a little super-glue and hope, or sending the work out to be done by someone else, I have some news: mending is hard work. In many cases, it would be easier to get a new thing.

Even those — including Christians — who intellectually understand the urgency of the climate crisis, and the need to take actions globally and individually, balk at many of the personal privations required.

Then he [Jesus] said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' (Luke 12:15)

The practice of mending is a great opportunity to reflect on one's attitude to material things. Our things are really God's things and caring for them is caring for His creation.

Choosing to make repairs is often a sacrifice, of time even more so than money. It is fast and easy to purchase something new. It takes thought to decide how best to mend something. It takes effort to understand how it works and can be made to work again. It takes dedication to find the tools and materials to mend it effectively. It takes time to effect the repair.

Moth and rust may destroy our material possessions, but considering them disposable *spiritually* does not mean considering them as disposable *physically*.



This well-loved dress has been extensively repaired multiple times and has finally been retired to garden-and-garage duty.

Taking that time to sit down and care for our possessions, doing that work, can be an act of discipleship. On a very tactile level, mending demonstrates many of the values by which we are called to live as followers of Jesus.

Caring for creation

Mending is, at its heart, about conservation of resources. To keep a broken item serviceable is to get more use out of the money we paid for it (our personal resources), as well as the energy embodied in its original production (the planet's resources). And all of these resources are gifts from God. Appropriate use of these resources is therefore part of our job as stewards of God's creation.

The practice of economy, or frugality, is essentially balancing the consumption of resources involved in an action in order to achieve the least waste. The climate crisis has tipped these scales, making it necessary to put more weight into the conservation of our planet's physical resources than ever before. Beside the increasing importance of keeping physical waste to a minimum, expenditure of time or money on repairs are dwindling considerations. The effort it will take to sew a patch on your favourite jacket is easily outweighed by the benefit of keeping it out of landfill.

Countering a culture of indulgence

To some, a noticeably mended item is a bit of an embarrassment. Long before social media distilled the concept into a noxious hard liquor, it has been a cultural imperative to continually demonstrate one's personal wealth and supposedly resulting happiness. In such an atmosphere, any indication of poverty (or less-than-ideal wealth) must be swept under the rug, and the perceived inability to replace something broken falls into that category.

As Christians, we are called to reject this world full of 'the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches' and instead let our actions shine as lights in the darkness (1 John 2:15-17). Choosing to make repairs, especially those which will be on display (such as the big patch on your favourite jacket), is therefore a countercultural action. Visible mending can be a powerful statement to others of one's priorities as a follower of Jesus.

Service to others

There are several ways to serve others through the practice of mending. The most obvious, direct act of service is to employ one's repair skills to help others with their own repair needs, especially those whose circumstances mean it will have a greater impact on their health and comfort. This kind of act of service is a central part of living in a community as Christians.



A metal ring ensures this high-use item stays functional as long as possible after mending.



A twist of wire replaces a problem bolt on this chicken feeder.

Performing repairs for others is only one aspect of serving others directly through mending. Repair mavens usually have a stash of materials and tools to use and the provision of these is a valuable service to those without them (and almost always a more economical way to make a repair). And obviously, passing on one's skills is a gift which keeps giving.

But a commitment to mending also serves people we may never even meet: the global poor who stand to lose the most and quickly from the devastation of a changing climate. Wealthy countries are able to overconsume to such a degree partly because others have so little, and consuming less is one of the (sadly, many) necessary steps toward an equitable and sustainable distribution of resources for all. And *every* action which slows or lessens the inevitable impacts of climate change aids those people and regions with less ability to deal with the deadly effects we are already seeing and will only see more of in the future. This group probably includes the people who sewed your favourite jacket. Sustainable practices are now and increasingly one of the most powerful ways we can 'share with God's people who are in need' (Romans 12:13).

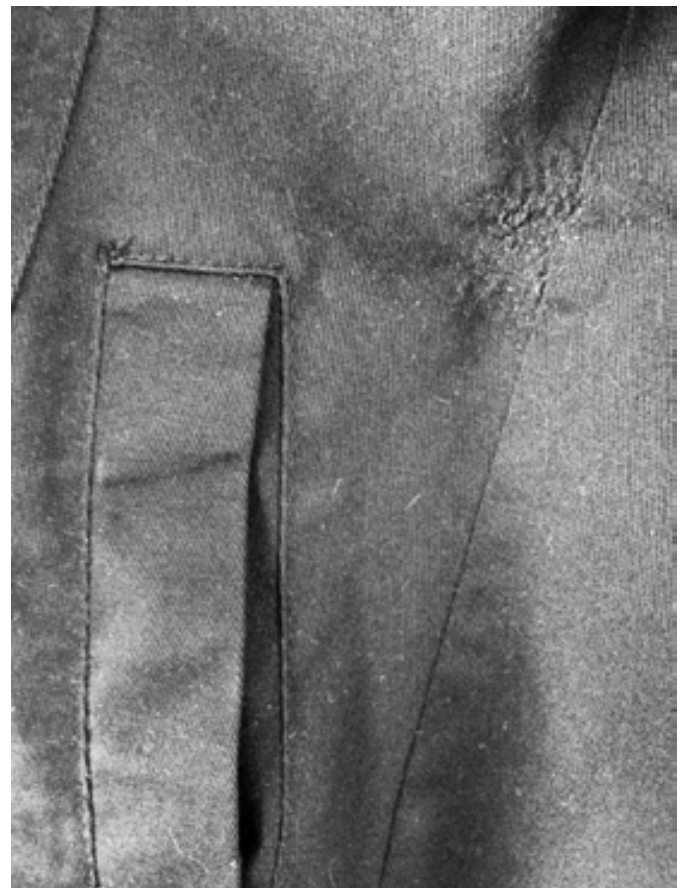
Redemption

The biblical metaphor is one of washing away sins, but the restoration of something considered rubbish (even to an imperfect state, which is where the mending metaphor falls short), is a moment to meditate on God's surpassing grace. It may only be a jacket, but an unwillingness to discard the worthless and an appreciation of the value of all things God has created

are attitudes to nurture as we seek to imitate Jesus. The sacrifice of time and money required when making repairs for others and the planet's future is an everyday opportunity to train ourselves to put aside worldly desires.

Mending can be hard work, but it is important work. It's all too easy to stuff that jacket into the landfill bin (it's unlikely to be compostable) and purchase a new one. But to do so ignores the pressing need to conserve the planet's resources in any way we can. Choosing to repair and continue to wear the jacket will demonstrate to others your commitment to care for God's planet and people, at the cost of personal prestige in our greedy, showy culture. The process of mending it provides an opportunity to bring to life on a small scale the values we seek to embody as followers of Jesus. Conserving our earthly goods does not necessarily indicate a harmful love of possessions. Storing up treasures in heaven may mean mending things which are here on earth.

Phoebe Garrett is an inveterate maker of things, with a particular interest in textiles and adapting historical craft techniques to bring about a greener future. She has a degree in ancient history and is currently studying weaving.



One of many repairs to the author's favourite jacket.



(News cont. from front page)

Theology, so he is obviously a thinker; but the main reason I asked him to take on the job is that he is passionate about the practical and material outworkings of his faith. He is a serious practitioner of 'voluntary simplicity', keeping alive the arcane arts of blacksmithing and the use of Windows 7. Indeed, craft skill runs in the family, as demonstrated by the article from his sister, Phoebe, in this edition. Jacob attends St Jude's Anglican Church in Carlton, Melbourne, where he helps lead the youth group and community homework club. It is a great pleasure to have Jacob on board the Manna Gum team.

By the time this goes to press, there will be some more episodes of MannaCast available. Matt Anslow has kindly stayed on to help with these while Jacob finds his feet. You can find the MannaCast at mannagum.podbean.com, or on your preferred podcast platform.

Please note the promo for the *A Different Way Week* on page 2. This is our one-week live-in intensive, hosted by the Seeds Community here in Long Gully, Bendigo, where we plumb the biblical, theoretical and practical depths of Christ's call to a new way of living. It will run from 14-19 November, God (and State Premiers) willing. Please pass this on to anyone you think might be interested, or contact us for more information.

Jonathan Cornford




*Jacob atop Mt. Buffalo last year.
Photo Credit: Caleb McElrea*





You can find the MannaCast at mannagum.podbean.com, or on your preferred podcast platform.

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MANNA GUM seeks to live within the economy of God – frugally, ethically and through the generous sharing of abundance within the community of faith. If our work resonates with you, please consider becoming a monthly financial supporter or making a one-off donation.

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About Manna Gum

Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. *Help Christians reclaim and practise Biblical teaching on material life; and*
2. *Promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others and the earth.*

Manna Gum is motivated by a vision of renewal of the Church in Australia as an alternative community that witnesses to the Kingdom of God.

Please contact us if you would like us to speak to your church, group or organisation; or if you would like more information about our work; or to discuss how we could support you and your church/group/organisation to explore some of these issues.