

Scripture (and in the writings of the early church) where what was implied and apparently practiced was a complete sharing of life, including the sharing of material possessions (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35). Even when the word is not explicitly employed, we see the concept at work. Thus a disciple such as Barnabas (Acts 4:36) is willing to sell a parcel of land and bring the money to the apostles in order to take care of pressing needs, not believing that his possessions are strictly "his own."

Some churches are experimenting with some creative ways of helping their members reconceive their relationship to their possessions. For example, I know of churches that maintain a database of people's stuff that they are willing to loan to other people. Some members may have only one or two items on the database, while others may have many. In each case, however, such a practice serves as an important reminder that our stuff is not our own. If we really are stewards, then we have to do everything in our power to make sure that what is done with it pleases and furthers the purposes of the One to whom it all belongs. Moreover, such a practice brings us into relationship with one another in ways that are not necessary when we each have our own stuff.

Finally, we should seek out opportunities to give without expectation of return. For example, those of us who are able should consider *donating* our blood. It's a simple gesture, yet in addition to helping another human being, it may also serve as a reminder that we need spaces in our lives that operate outside the market. There are very few spaces left in our culture that are not framed by self-interested exchanges; Christians should be grateful for those few that remain and should joyfully support them. How tragic it would be if we were known as the people who on Sundays celebrate the new life we have received through the gift of Christ's blood and who then turn around on Monday and sell our blood for a profit to a brother or sister in need.

*I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Eph 3:16-17)*

## THREE

### Cultivating Joy in the Midst of Manufactured Desire

*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (Jn 15:8-11)*

*When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (Jn 16:21-22)*

**T**he memory remains so vivid that it could have happened yesterday. Kim and I were in the combination labor and delivery room of our local hospital, anxiously awaiting and painfully aiding the arrival of our first son. I felt intensely helpless, coaching Kim to breathe through the intense pain of the contractions and then to rest between them. Never before had I seen my wife in such agony; her iron grip on my left hand during the contractions was a periodic reminder that our roles in this unfolding miracle were terribly unequal. At one point I actually had to remove my sterling silver wedding band, realizing only later that Kim's clasp on my hand had cracked it.

Yet this is not what either of us remembers most vividly. Kim tells me that she can remember the pain, but only with effort. What she remembers most



clearly is how she felt when the doctor laid this tiny, helpless life upon her chest. And what is forever etched on my mind is the expression of unspeakable joy that appeared on Kim's face at this very moment. What both of us felt at this instant, with tears of joy flowing freely down our faces, was as intense and as indescribable as anything either of us has ever experienced. Though neither we nor countless others who have experienced this can fully explain how we felt, when we do try to speak of it, one word inevitably comes to mind: joy, pure joy.

Most of us can remember at least a few times in our lives when we have experienced this kind of intense joy. Is there some connection between such experiences of joy and what Paul identifies as the second fruit of the Spirit?

### The Character of Joy

Gaining a deeper understanding of this second fruit of the Spirit is complicated by its overlapping usages. In English we commonly use the same word for the *state* of experiencing joy itself ("Playing in the orchestra gives me such joy"), for the *source* of our joy ("My children are the joy of my life") and for our *expressions* of joy ("When I finally saw her again, I jumped for joy"). Even though New Testament Greek has several different words that are commonly translated as "joy," the word most often used—*chara*—is likewise used in overlapping ways for the state, source and expression of joy. Thus when the star leads the Magi to Bethlehem, they are "overwhelmed with joy" (Mt. 2:10), while John the Baptist, when speaking of his joy at the coming of Jesus, notes that the friend of the bridegroom "rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice" (Jn. 3:29). Moreover, anyone who has studied Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is often referred to as "the epistle of joy," knows that Paul repeatedly urges his brothers and sisters to express their joy, to rejoice.

But what is this joy we are called to express? What experience are we trying to convey when we find ourselves reaching for this word? Usually, we employ this word to communicate our intense satisfaction, our sense of well-being and our underlying contentment at having experienced something for which we have earnestly longed, something that we have deeply desired. The object of this longing and desire can of course vary, as can the depth and intensity of our subsequent joy.

To see this more clearly, it may help to compare the experience of joy to other human experiences, such as the experience of pleasure. Joy and pleasure both involve taking delight in something or someone. But the objects of delight, as well as the reasons for delighting in that object, affect the character of that subsequent delight. Enjoying a good meal and enjoying a good conversation are both pleasurable, but they are pleasures of a different kind because their objects are different. Moreover, enjoying a good meal when we are famished is different again from enjoying a good meal prepared by our dearest friend. Each may be the occasion of intense pleasure, but the character of that pleasure will differ to the extent that we are drawn out of our selves. The more that we are drawn out of our selves, the more we likely characterize our delight as *joy* rather than simply *pleasure*.

Hence, unlike pleasure, joy cannot be pursued for its own sake. Joy is the satisfaction that comes when we find that for which we've been looking. So to pursue joy itself is akin to looking for something not because you want to *find* it, but because you want the *pleasure* that accompanies finding it. Such a strategy is bound to fail, however, because joy—as C. S. Lewis well noted—cannot be pursued for its own sake; rather, joy is a byproduct whose "very existence presupposes that you desire not it but something other and outer."<sup>1</sup> Joy is simply one of the consequences of being open to that which is beyond one's self. To pursue joy for its own sake, in order to take delight in one's own delight, is to ignore this crucial "other-directedness" of joy.

This outward movement of joy is perhaps why Scripture so closely links joy and love. By reflecting on the character of God's love as grace, as gift, as we did in the last chapter, we are prepared to see the significance of the etymological connection between the Greek word for "grace" (*charis*) and the New Testament word most commonly translated as "joy" (*chara*). Both words developed from the same root, and both imply the activity of freely taking delight in something or someone beyond one's self.

Reaching out beyond our selves is only possible if we are able to overcome those innumerable fears that urge us to turn inward and focus exclusively on ourselves. For example, the old adage, "If you don't take care of yourself, no one else will," is not so much a piece of sage advice as it is an excuse for



self-centeredness rooted in our fear and mistrust of one another. The Christian life, in contrast, calls us to "fear not." By freeing us from our fears, God frees us to enter into the life of love and joy. As Evelyn Underhill writes: "Real love always heals fear and neutralizes egotism, and so, as love grows up in us, we shall worry about ourselves less and less, and admire and delight in God and his other children more and more, and this is the secret of joy."<sup>2</sup>

Given this connection between love and joy, we should not be surprised when God's love as expressed in God's creative and redemptive work incites a joyful response, both from creation and from God. The book of Job tells us that God's creative activity led the stars to sing and all the heavenly beings to shout for joy (38:7). Isaiah assures Israel that when God delivers them from exile, their response will be one of everlasting joy:

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Is 35:10; cf. 52:9)

But Isaiah also makes clear that God's activity of recreating Israel brings joy not only to the people but also to God:

For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.  
But be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight.  
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,  
and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,  
or the cry of distress. (Is 65:17-19; cf. Is 62:5; Zeph 3:17)

This emphasis on the outward movement of joy is carried over into the New Testament, where healing and restoration of wholeness are an occasion for joy and praise. When Jesus heals a crippled woman, she stands straight up and begins praising God (Lk 13:13). The Samaritan leper who is healed by Jesus returns to thank him, "praising God with a loud voice" (Lk 17:15). When the lame man at the Beautiful Gate is healed, he gets up and goes into the temple, "walking and leaping and praising God" (Acts 3:8). Similarly Philip's healing ministry in Samaria brings "great joy in that city" (Acts 8:8).

The New Testament also testifies that conversion itself is an occasion for joy, both for those converted and for those involved in the harvest. After his encounter with Philip and his subsequent baptism, the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:39). The Philippian jailer and his entire household rejoiced "that he had become a believer in God" (Acts 16:34). Jesus notes that the fields are ripe for harvesting and that the reaper is gathering "fruit for eternal life," as a result, both sower and reaper rejoice together (Jn 4:36). Moreover, Luke notes that the conversion of the Gentiles "brought great joy to all the believers" (Acts 15:3).

Joy also characterizes our relationships with other Christians, particularly those whom we have helped to nurture in the Lord. Paul asks the Thessalonians, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!" (1 Thess 2:19-20; cf. 3:9). Paul also calls the Philippians "my joy and crown" (Phil 4:1) and tells the believers in Rome of his deep desire to "come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company" (Rom 15:32; cf. 2 Tim 1:4; Philem 7).

But perhaps most significantly, joy is a defining characteristic of the life of God. The parables of Luke 15 remind us that God also rejoices when those who were lost are found. God has always longed for the reconciliation of all creation. Thus when some parts of that creation are restored to their proper relation to God, God takes great delight. The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son all emphasize in their own way this profound truth: *God rejoices when those who are estranged are restored.* If God's life is marked by such joy, how can the lives of those who are called to embody God's character be any less joyful?



## Suffering and Joy

One of the hallmarks of Christian joy is that it can be experienced in the midst of immense sorrow and loss. Here we find one of the great differences between the joy of the Christian community and the joy or happiness that the world knows. Our society often encourages us to believe that joy and happiness are the same thing and that both can only be experienced by *escaping* from the world's cares, afflictions and sorrows. But escaping or avoiding the world of pain and suffering in order to "be happy," in our culture's language, is neither possible nor desirable for the follower of Christ.

Often we define joy or happiness as the *absence* of something undesirable, such as pain, suffering or disappointment. If these undesirable states are absent, we surmise that we are happy. But Christian joy is the proper response to the *presence* of something desirable: God. Granted, there are plenty of times, because of our sinful proclivities, that we do *not* desire God's presence. Yet as Augustine reminds us in his memorable words addressed to God, "You have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." If Augustine is correct—that the final resting place of our hearts and our affections is in God—then it follows that true joy and happiness can only be found in God, a point which Augustine himself makes later in the same work:

O Lord, far be it from me to think that whatever joy I feel makes me truly happy. For there is a joy that is not given to those who do not love you, but only to those who love you for your own sake. You yourself are their joy. Happiness is to rejoice in you and for you and because of you. This is true happiness and there is no other. Those who think that there is another kind of happiness look for joy elsewhere, but theirs is not true joy.<sup>3</sup>

If God is both the source and object of our joy, such joy is not, therefore, necessarily incompatible with sorrow or pain. That this is the case we see from the testimony of Scripture. Although the Old Testament rarely links suffering and joy, except to note that one is often followed by the other (Ps 30:5; Ps 126; Is 16:8-10), the New Testament makes some striking connections between the two. For example, in his parable of the sower, Jesus observes the way in which afflictions and persecutions can have a devastating effect on

initially joyful—but inadequately rooted—followers:

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground, when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. (Mk 4:16-17)

But suffering does not rob all believers of their joy in the Lord. Indeed, the New Testament contains numerous examples of and admonitions to living joyfully in the midst of suffering. Jesus tells his disciples in his farewell discourse that, like a woman who gives birth, their coming pain at his absence will be replaced by an indestructible joy. This abiding joy—made possible by the Spirit's abiding presence—overflows even in the midst of suffering and persecution. Hence, after being flogged and thrown into prison in Philippi, Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God (Acts 16:25). Paul praises the Thessalonians for being an example of living joyfully despite persecution: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia" (1 Thess 1:6-7).

Living joyfully despite persecution and affliction does not require one to deny the reality of suffering or pain. Suffering and pain, both our own and of others, are real and they can take a toll on even the heartiest Christian faith. Yet people are capable of enduring an enormous amount of pain if they believe that this pain and suffering are not the final word. The writer of Hebrews alludes to this with respect to Jesus, "who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2). In this way Christian joy is bound up closely with hope: we believe that the pain and suffering that we experience in this life, though real, is not the last word on the matter. Or, as Karl Barth has aptly stated, in the face of human suffering the joy of a Christian stands as a "defiant 'Nevertheless!'"<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament sounds an additional note about joy and suffering, and this note is both more striking and more open to misunderstanding. Several times in Scripture we are told that Christians do and should take joy



in their suffering. For example, Jesus tells his followers:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. (Lk 6:22-23)

Or we have the account of Paul and Barnabas who, after being persecuted in Antioch of Pisidia, leave and go to Iconium “filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52). To many people, including many Christians, this sounds disturbingly like some form of masochism. But Scripture does not instruct Christians to rejoice in their pain and suffering in any straightforward way, as if the *source* of our joy is the pain or suffering itself. Rather, Scripture suggests that certain kinds of suffering—particularly suffering that results from being faithful to Christ—can be an *occasion* for joy. So the apostles, after they have been flogged for disobeying the Sanhedrin’s order not to teach in the name of Jesus, “rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name” (Acts 5:41).

A slightly different tack is taken by James, who insists that trials may be the occasion for growth and maturity and thus an occasion for joy: “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas 1:2-4).

Finally, this theme of growth and maturity is combined with the admonition to follow joyfully the example of Christ—even in his sufferings—in two other arresting New Testament passages:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. (1 Pet 4:12-14)

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am

completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. (Col 1:24)

Whatever it may mean to “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions,” Paul found it to be an occasion for joy. This affirmation, along with the above discussion, should be enough to convince us not only that joy is central to the Christian life but also that the joy of the Christian community—by being determinatively other-directed—is of a different character than the world’s joy.

### Obstacles to a Life of Joy

If joy requires a willingness to be open to something beyond one’s self, then it should come as no surprise that people deeply rooted in the dominant cultural *ethos* have a difficult time experiencing joy. We are encouraged from an early age to seek our own pleasure above all else. Such relentless pursuit of personal pleasure is what the dominant culture means by “the pursuit of happiness.” Each of us is urged, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, to pursue our own individually-defined happiness; in almost every case, we are called to pursue that which promises to give pleasure to each of us as individuals. The dominant culture also has enormous power to form our desires and affections. If one doubts this, simply consider the following questions: Where did we learn to desire what we desire? Where did we learn what we should want out of life? Or what we should wear or eat? Or what we should look like? Or what car to drive or house to buy? Or what we should do with our time? Although most of our desires have complex sources, we would be naive to doubt the significant impact that the dominant culture wields in shaping—and in many cases fabricating—those desires.

*Manufacturing desire.* Many cultural practices instill in us the desires that direct and give meaning to our lives. One of the most powerful of these practices and the one that may be most responsible for inhibiting the cultivation of Christian joy is the practice of advertising. This complex and multi-tentacled industry spends well over a trillion dollars a year to instill in us certain desires. And given that most advertisers do not consider themselves



to be engaging in charity, one might suspect that ads often succeed in eliciting the desired response. In short, if a company like Proctor and Gamble determined that its advertisements for products such as Crest and Prell weren't working, it wouldn't spend three billion dollars a year in television advertising alone (an amount that is nearly 50 percent more than the entire gross national product of our poor neighbor to the south, Haiti).

Nor are the persuasive practices in which advertisers engage limited simply to establishing and maintaining brand loyalty. Instead, advertising both plays on and helps create our contemporary confusions and anxieties about who we are and whether we have worth. Advertisers freely admit that contemporary advertising involves creating a connection between their products and certain images or values. The hoped-for result is that people will be convinced that consuming a certain product will bring with it the associated and desired image or values. John Kavanaugh writes:

Friendship, intimacy, love, pride, happiness, and joy are actually the *objects* we buy and consume, much more so than the tubes, liquor bottles, Cadillacs, and Buicks that promise them and bear their names. And since none of these deepest human hopes can be fulfilled in any product, the mere consumption of them is never enough; "more" of the product, or a "new improved" product, is the only relief offered to our human longings. Thus the seller drives us to greater purchasing with even more extravagantly concocted promises: more commodities are the solution to anxiety stimulated by media manipulation. Consumption, consequently, is not just an economic factor. It emerges as a "way of life." It is an addiction.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the line penned by the English poet Lord Byron—"There's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away"—takes on an added poignancy in a culture such as ours that prides itself on creating ever-new but always evanescent desires. And because advertising cultivates the insatiable desire for the new, the improved, the bigger and better, we find ourselves all but incapable of experiencing joy and contentment in our everyday lives.

Although the practice of advertising shapes our experience of desire in powerful ways, it does not act in a cultural vacuum. Rather, this practice (along with others) is interwoven with certain convictions, narratives and disposi-

tions that together shape our experience of desire and our subsequent views of happiness and joy. Several deserve brief mention.

*Glorifying the novel.* One of the dominant culture's deepest prejudices is that the new is always better than the old. A corollary to this prejudice is that the past should always be viewed with suspicion. This prejudice is codified and passed on in the stories our culture tells of how traditional thinking consistently inhibits individual autonomy, freedom and progress. For a trenchant example of this, we need only consider the powerful hold that a figure like Galileo has over our imaginations. What schoolboy or girl has not heard the story of how the authorities of the church rejected Galileo's discoveries, learning well the lesson that tradition always obstructs progress and innovation?

This desire for the new, however, is not limited merely to a preference for that which is up-to-date and modern; it also extends to the desire for "the new" understood as "different." Hence, we are convinced that if we are to be genuinely happy, our lives will need to be filled with an endless array of new and exciting experiences. As a result, we are convinced that to spend one's life doing the same sorts of things is a sure recipe for boredom and unhappiness. We are taught at an early age that "variety is the spice of life," but increasingly we seem to want the spices to constitute the whole meal. But setting off on a quest for ever-new forms of pleasure is to begin a pilgrimage that is sure to disappoint, since the very character of that search guarantees that one can not be ultimately satisfied. The end result, it seems, is that we find ourselves pursuing pleasure for its own sake, a pursuit that robs us of our ability to experience and express genuine joy.

We do not necessarily drop this desire for the new (and therefore better) when we gather as the church. There is a tendency among many Christians, especially young people, to doubt the worth of the church's two thousand-year-old traditions. Many believe that this "old, boring stuff" automatically inhibits progress and growth. Many don't want the church to do anything that the church has done for a long time; they want everything to be new and different. For example, why would we want to do the same things over and over again in worship week after week, year after year? In many people's minds



what the church most needs is a good dose of variety in order to keep people from getting bored. There is of course a legitimate place for new expressions of the Christian faith, but we need to ask ourselves: What makes these new expressions legitimate? Is it simply because they are *new*? Or is it because we discern that they are edifying expressions of *the Christian faith*? If it is the latter, then there must be some appropriate reasons for glancing backward, for otherwise how would we know that this *new* expression was an expression of anything *Christian*? Such discernments call us to evaluate our new expressions against previous expressions in determining whether they are faithful. As a result, Christians have their own reasons for believing that it will not do to jettison the past as so much worthless jetsam.

*Craving more.* The desire for "more" and "better" does not always simply translate into a desire for the new; the desire for "more" and "better" can also manifest itself in economic terms where *more* means "bigger": a bigger salary, a bigger house, a bigger car, a bigger wardrobe, a bigger assortment of toys. All of this and more is commonly assumed to be "better" and therefore desirable. But in addition to "bigger," *more* also regularly means simply that: "more" (as in "more than one"). If owning one house is good, having a vacation home in addition to that is considered even better; if one car is good, two or three would be better still; if one graduate degree is good, wouldn't two or three be even better? The areas of our lives where we have come to assume that more is necessarily better are legion. We desire to shop at the grocery store with the most variety, because having more choice is better. We desire to upgrade our current computer system, even though the present one works just fine, because we have learned that more speed and more memory capacity are better. We desire to cruise the information superhighway in order to have more information instantly at our fingertips—even if we don't have a context that would allow us to know what to do with the information we already have—because we are sure that having more information is better. The list goes on and on.

In short, we are led to believe that our endless pursuit of "more" will eventually lead to more happiness. Furthermore, because we believe we are entitled to pursue happiness and because our culture defines happiness in

terms of what we possess, we believe we are entitled to acquire and accumulate whatever possessions we believe will make us happy. The result, as many of us can well attest, is that our lives (not to mention our closets, garages and attics) are often cluttered with stuff that promised to bring us happiness but didn't and doesn't.

The threat to joy posed by the "more-is-always-better" conviction is obvious. If more is always better, then there is little reason to be thankful for or content with what one presently has. The assumption is that one will be *more* happy and *more* content in the future, because one will *have* more. But once this conviction is established, there is no logical stopping point where one will finally be content at all, for one would always be happier if one had more. The result is that whatever joy and contentment we might experience and express in the present are endlessly deferred.

*Breeding anxiety and fear.* Rather than joy and contentment, the dominant culture cultivates a way of life marked by the dispositions of anxiety and fear. Advertisers know that in a relatively homogeneous society that offers few opportunities for most people to stand out, many consumers want to distinguish themselves from other people by their peculiar patterns of consumption. But behind this desire to be (triflingly) different lurks a deeper anxiety and fear: the fear of being (substantively) different.

For example, if I buy a new Honda Accord rather than an old Chevrolet Chevette in order to get to and from work, I have distinguished myself from other people in a certain sort of way. At least this is the assumption. But if I choose to walk, ride a bicycle or take the bus to work, I am in danger of being considered "weird." (Don't worry, this is just an example; I drive a car to work just like everyone else.) Though it would never occur to anyone to inquire as to why I bought a new Accord rather than an old Chevette (the reasons are obvious, right?), most people would find it difficult *not* to inquire about my preferred mode of transportation if I arrived by some means other than my own automobile. Or more to the point, even if they *didn't* ask, I would likely feel that I needed to explain myself. And if I did explain myself, I would likely try to do so in a way that showed that I wasn't that different from them after all: "I'd like to drive to work, but our car is in the shop," or "We're trying to



save money for our summer vacation, and this seemed like a reasonable way to pinch pennies"; or "I decided that I needed more exercise than I was getting, so biking seemed like the perfect solution." Each of these responses leaves things pretty much as they are, thereby affirming both my peers and me. What I certainly would not want to say is something like: "Well, our family has decided that owning an automobile isn't as essential as our culture has led us to believe, and so we've decided not to own one in order to free up more resources for kingdom work. Besides, we've found that not owning one makes you dependent on other people in all sorts of surprisingly wonderful ways." Saying *that* would make you truly different, saying *that* would make you a threat, and saying *that* would likely ostracize you from just about everyone you know, including most Christians.

One of the great ironies of consumerism is that it promotes itself as a means to exercise our personal freedom, when in fact it promotes the most insidious forms of homogeneity. We are led to think that we are incredibly free when we go off to buy what *we* desire, but it turns out that we end up buying pretty much what everyone else does. Sure, there are some variations in style, but this is part of the game. What is more significant is the way this freedom is really a form of bondage. How many people feel free *not* to buy a new car every three or four years? (Or not to buy one at all?) How many people feel free *not* to dress in the latest styles or fashions? How many people feel free *not* to look like, talk like, walk like and think like everyone else? In short, how many people feel free *not* to desire what everyone else desires?

The advertising industry feeds on and promotes our fear of being (too) different. We desperately desire to fit in and we fear that we won't. As a result, we spend much of our lives trying to look and dress and talk and consume like other people. But the gospel has good news for us: we no longer have to believe that our worth is contingent upon our ability to produce and market an acceptable image of ourselves for the consumption of those around us. Rather than trying to transform ourselves into the latest image offered to us by Madison Avenue, Christians are free to be transformed into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; cf. 1 Pet 1:14).

As should be obvious, the mindset described above does not just affect the

lives of individual Christians; it also affects the life of the gathered community. When we gather, our thanksgiving is often truncated, because our lives are habituated to feel insatiable desire rather than heartfelt gratitude. Thus even when we do offer thanks, it is often with an eye toward how much *more* thankful we'd be if something really good would happen to us.

Similarly, we are very fearful about appearing to be different from our neighbors, and we are perhaps even more fearful about raising our children to be different. Too often we want them (as well as ourselves) to be successful in the world's eyes and not to stick out too much. The result is that most of us have a thin veneer of Christian conviction that overlays (and hardly challenges) the convictions that we have learned from the wider culture.

### Cultivating Joy

Cultivating joy in the midst of a culture that is steeped in manufactured and insatiable desires will not be easy. Yet there is reason to be hopeful, for God has given the church enormous resources on which it may draw. We begin our reflections once again by focusing on the church at worship.

*Rejoicing in worship.* Desire in itself is not a bad thing. Christians are not called to refrain from desiring, but to desire the right things for the right reasons. In a culture like ours, Christians must carefully examine the sources and objects of our desires. We are frequently tempted to take delight primarily in what this world has to offer, with the result being that our own pleasure and that which promises to deliver that pleasure become our primary objects of delight. Although God certainly wants us to enjoy the goodness of the created order, the created order and its pleasures should not become our idols. Paul notes that humankind has repeatedly turned away from God, worshipping the creation rather than the Creator (Rom 1:22-25). What would it mean to desire God and what God desires, rather than what the world teaches us to desire? How do we learn to desire God like the psalmist did?

O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.



So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,  
beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than life,

my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live;

I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,

and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

when I think of you on my bed,

and meditate on you in the watches of the night,

for you have been my help,

and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy (Ps 63:1-7; cf. Ps 84)

Elsewhere we are told how David brought up the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem with rejoicing and that he “danced before the LORD with all his might” (2 Sam 6:12-14). To those who did not understand the redemption brought by this God, David’s actions no doubt seemed odd. Yet for those of us who have even greater reason than David did to rejoice and dance before the Lord, worship ought to be the very character of our lives.

The joy that comes from worship and thanksgiving derives from our desiring and then experiencing what we were created to do. If our day-to-day lives fail to be marked by joy, perhaps it is because those lives so seldom testify to what we believe is the goal or purpose for life. Surely we have not been called out of darkness into his glorious light in order to bear witness that “He who dies with the most toys wins.” One of the church’s traditional responses to the question of our true purpose has been that our “chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 1). This is our eternal purpose. When we gather for worship, therefore, we are focusing our attention on that which is our chief end. Such gatherings should be marked by the joy that comes from doing what we were created to do.

Such gatherings should also be characterized by joy because Christ is present in our gathering. Christ’s presence brings joy: recall that the resurrection accounts are filled with references to joy (Mt 28:8; Lk 24:41; Jn 20:20). Luke’s account of the ascension is similarly instructive: “While he was

blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God” (Lk 24:51-53).

The Psalms encourage us to make a joyful noise to the Lord (Ps 66:1; 95:1-2; 98:4-6; 100:1).

But let the righteous be joyful;

let them exult before God;

let them be jubilant with joy.

Sing to God, sing praises to his name;

lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds—

his name is the LORD—

be exultant before him. (Ps 68:3-4)

Too much of the time there is little joy in our worship. Although reverence and solemnity in worship have their rightful place, our gatherings must also have a strongly celebrative and joyful character. Many of us are more than willing to “shout for joy” when our favorite athletic team prospers, but find it difficult to find anything worth shouting about in the presence of the living God. Perhaps this is why the so-called charismatic movement has struck a chord with so many people. Yet all Christians, rather than just a select group, should be “charismatic,” in the sense of being noticeably marked by the grace and joy of the Lord.

The source of our joy as Christians is God and God’s reconciling work. Even the Old Testament rings out with psalms of joy to the God who saves. This joy in God’s salvation cannot be silenced by the misfortunes of our lives:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,

and no fruit is on the vines;

though the produce of the olive fails

and the fields yield no food;

though the flock is cut off from the fold

and there is no herd in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the LORD;

I will exult in the God of my salvation. (Hab 3:17-18)



In the New Testament this joy is focused specifically in the reconciling work of God in Christ. To express this, the early church took those everyday occasions and images of joy and gave them a new, christological focus. Harvesting, getting married, giving birth, finding something lost, sharing a banquet—all are used as ways of expressing the joy that marks our lives on account of Christ. This inseparable connection between our joy and the reconciling work of God in Christ is powerfully expressed in 1 Peter:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet 1:3-9)

As important as the church's worship is, we must also keep it in proper perspective. When we joyfully praise God, we become participants in a broader, richer, ceaseless worship. Scripture tells us that the throne of God is surrounded by those who engage in the eternal worship of our God. When we gather to worship, therefore, we are joining the heavenly chorus in anticipation of the future and eternal worship that we will freely and joyfully offer.

Although God does not need our worship, it would be wrong to suggest that God does not delight in it. Shakespeare once wrote that "joy delights in joy" (Sonnet 8). I believe that God enjoys our joy. Scripture admonishes us repeatedly to "bless the Lord," which is a strange thing to do for someone who arguably needs nothing that we have to offer. Yet God inhabits the praises of God's people. In a sense, when our joyful worship blesses God it completes a circle of love and joy: God loves and redeems God's people, who respond

with joy and adoration, which in turn brings joy to God. Perhaps it is similar to something I frequently experience when I return home from a day at work. As I walk across the yard to the front door, our younger children are often in our living room standing on a wooden stool that sits in front of the large picture window. Their joyful bobbings up and down usually catch my eye long before I am close enough to see their faces. When I am closer and we make eye contact, they usually charge for the door, where they greet me with outstretched arms and ear-to-ear smiles. As I stoop to take them in my arms, I am often deeply moved by the purity and intensity of their joy. Indeed, some of *my* most intense moments of joy have come as a response to theirs. Perhaps God does no less when we joyfully enter into the presence of God to offer our heartfelt worship and adoration.

*Nurturing contentment.* If our lives were marked by a spirit of joy that flows from authentic praise and thanksgiving, this would affect more than our corporate worship. The habit of expressing our gratitude for God's abundant care seems to place a much-needed check on our covetousness. Can we imagine offering thanks and praise for God's unmerited bounty and at the same time immersing ourselves in the interminable quest for the "new," the "better" and the "different"? I doubt it. Perhaps our insatiable cravings for more and better say more than we know about the depth of our joy and the genuineness of our praise and thanksgiving.

As Christians, our goal is not to quench our desires or even to minimize their intensity. Rather, what must be different is the *object* of our desires and affections. Paul tells the Philippians that he has learned to be content with whatever he has (Phil 4:11). My hunch is that Paul's contentment was made possible not least by the wellspring of joy and thanksgiving that God had sprung at the center of his soul, a joy and thanksgiving that clearly marked all his letters. Because Paul's desires and affections were set on God, the importance of pursuing worldly pleasures faded.

In a similar vein the first letter to Timothy reminds us "There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment, for we brought nothing into this world, so that we can take nothing out of it, but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich



fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (1 Tim 6:6-9; cf. Heb 13:5; 1 Jn 2:15-17). If there is one phrase that well describes the lives of countless people, including the lives of many Christians, it is simply that: "trapped by many senseless and harmful desires." But God's desire is not that we be trapped by our desires, but that our desires be rightly ordered to God.

*Reconciling tradition.* Cultivating a life of joy and contentment in an age such as ours is no easy task. Formidable as it is, it would certainly be even more so were we without one of our greatest resources: the history and traditions of the church across time and space. Unfortunately these immense and rich resources too often lie fallow in our tradition-suspicious culture. In our rush for the new and the better, we ignore much from the church's past that God might use to edify us today. Rather than limit our imaginations to a repertoire of stories defined by our desires for newness and up-to-dateness, we might open up our imaginations to being enriched by what God has done in the lives of Christians across the centuries and around the world. Similarly God has been praised in song in innumerable languages and cultures across the ages. Why limit ourselves to what has been written by middle-class American Christians during the last ten years? (Or for that matter, to what was written by middle-class European and American Christians during the latter half of the nineteenth century?)

I am firmly convinced that one of the greatest obstacles to living the Christian life in contemporary society is an impoverished imagination. Most of us will find it difficult to live a life we cannot imagine. (This, by the way, is the same principle that makes advertising so effective: ads help you imagine what your life would be like with such and such a product.) But how will we imagine a life different from the one we are currently living if we do not immerse ourselves in a different set of narratives that display life and its purposes differently? Here the traditions of the church across time and space offer us wealth beyond measure. By stepping ourselves in the stories of Christians across the ages—by listening to their struggles, their failures, their God-enabled victories—we begin to have our imaginations opened up to new possibilities hidden within our seemingly necessity-driven contexts. Contrary

to the spirit of our age, therefore, living faithfully in the present might require us to listen much more attentively to the past.

*En-joying children.* Finally, let me mention briefly an area that could be the subject of its own book. It seems to me that the cultivation of joy cannot be easily separated from the presence of children. Those who would cultivate joy could do worse than provide themselves with regular opportunities to interact with and care for children. The reasons for this appear to be at least twofold. First, children are a seemingly endless source of joy for others, not least because they are so full of joy. Let's face it: children see the world differently than we do. Although in some cases we might be justified in labeling their views as "childish," more often than not being around children reminds us that our view of the world is unnecessarily jaded. The result: our all-too-pervasive cynicism and deeply-held suspicions rob us of joy.

Another reason for regularly hanging out with children is that such a practice reminds us that joy is not to be equated with trivial notions of pleasure or happiness. Anyone who has changed a dozen diapers, played hide-and-go-seek for the fourth time in an afternoon and helped to settle an interminable squabble for who-knows-how-many times knows this to be the case. Although it is true that most people do not *en-joy* such necessary activities, it is also the case that joy can pop up in and around these and other such activities without warning. Somehow we rightly suspect, even if we cannot explain why it should be so, that if we were to avoid all of these seemingly unpleasant tasks, we would also be robbing ourselves of countless opportunities to experience deep and abiding joy. It seems that wherever there are children, joy is not far away.

### Reflection Questions and Practical Suggestions

How can Christians go about loosening the grip that manufactured desires have on our lives and the ways in which those desires rob our lives of joy? There are of course no simple solutions, but there are some things we *can* do to try and cultivate a life of joy.

□ Reflect on the way you begin most days. What typically happens in the first ten minutes of your day? In the first hour? Do your mind and your



energies, like those of most people, turn immediately to the concerns and pressures of the day ahead? If so, joy may be having a difficult time gaining a foothold in your life. Rather than beginning each day with the frenzy that marks so much of our lives, perhaps we would be wise to spend some quiet moments at the beginning of each day giving thanks to God for life's seemingly simple pleasures and joys. Even a couple of minutes after we first open our eyes, before we get out of bed, might help us gain the perspective we need as we respond to all the seemingly urgent claims on our attention.

□ Make a list of all your deepest desires, being as honest with yourself as you can. After making your list, go back through your list and reflect on each one. For each desire jot down as clearly as you can *why* you desire this. Next, try to discern *how* you came to desire this. What led you to desire this rather than, or more than, something else? Finally, in light of the above discussion and your knowledge of what God desires, try to discern if your longings and desires are appropriate. Where they seem appropriate, give thanks to God for instilling right desires in your heart. Where your desires seem inappropriate, ask God to direct your longings in other directions.

But this raises another important issue: how do you decide what you really need? If we live in a culture that unceasingly manufactures novel desires, how can we trust our own sense of what we need? And if, as Christians, we have even more reasons to suspect the desires of our heart, shouldn't we be less than willing to put stock in our own views about such matters? Likely we have here another good reason why Christians need to be part of a functioning community of faith. What would it mean for us to be the kind of community that would encourage people to have their desires and needs appraised by others within the community of faith? Obviously this would run counter to our culture and would probably feel to many of us like a frontal attack on our personal freedom (and would also likely make us and others who heard about us wonder if we were part of some strange "cult"). But such an admission is only a reminder that our culture encourages each of us to think of our personal freedom as license to consume *whatever* we want to *whenever* we want to; we need be accountable to no one for such decisions but ourselves.

Is it possible that I would think differently about my "needs" if I were

encouraged to discuss them with my brothers and sisters in Christ? Such a disciplining of our needs would not deny that we have needs, but it might give us some much-needed (and perhaps even welcome) help in distinguishing legitimate from fabricated needs. Of course, given how strange such a suggestion sounds to most people (including many Christians), I suspect that those who see the wisdom in such a practice might begin modestly. You might seek one or two other Christians that believe such a practice makes sense and begin by submitting to them for discernment some of your own "personal" needs and desires.

□ If you're like most people, there are at least a few suspect items on your list of desires. You may even have had a difficult time discerning how you came to desire those things. Our desires are shaped in subtle and not-so-subtle ways and so we should be vigilant about the sources we allow to form our desires. We can certainly work to resist some of the impact of fabricated desire by minimizing our exposure to its primary venues. Television remains the advertising medium of choice, not least because of its enormous audience. But it would be a mistake to think that merely zapping the ads would be enough, though this might be a logical place to begin. One problem with such an approach is that it ignores the way in which television has intentionally blurred the line between programming and advertising. This trend is most visible on channels like Home Shopping Network and MTV, but it is not limited to them. In the past, programs routinely either used generic-looking products or attempted to hide the brand names of the products that did appear; however, advertisers now pay handsome sums to have their products appear prominently in sitcoms, soaps and movies.

Yet it would also be a mistake to think that the only desires that are being instilled by television advertising or programming are those for certain products. Rather, what is being aroused in many cases is a desire for desiring, a desire that makes contentment with who one is and what one has all but impossible. Such desire, coupled with our insecurities about who we are, make possible such things as the fashion industry, which routinely informs us that the clothes we bought last year to make a statement are making quite a different statement now that they are "out of style." Since this desire for



desiring is aroused as much by programming as it is by advertisements, cutting down on the amount of television you watch is probably a good place to begin. And when you do watch, you should do so with the full awareness that television programmers and advertisers have more to gain if their audiences are not only continually dissatisfied with their lives, but are also looking for novel ways of filling that void.

We might also consider carefully the impact of leafing through the advertising circulars and mail-order catalogs that arrive daily in our mailboxes. How many times have we found ourselves "needing" something immediately after thumbing through these ads and finding out that this or that (previously unnecessary or even unknown) product was "on sale"? I suspect that advertisers are more than happy for us to feel as if we are doing ourselves some favor by buying at a discount something that only minutes before we didn't need at all. Perhaps it would be a small step in the right direction if we determined not to peruse these instruments of desire unless we had already determined what it was that we needed.

□ **Work to expand your and your church's repertoire of stories and songs.** For example, you might commit to reading at least one biography or autobiography each year of a Christian from another era or culture. You might also commit to learning at least one song from a culture other than your own. Rather than judging the song on whether you "like" it or whether it fits your "style," determine to appreciate the song for its ability to communicate something vital about the Christian faith.

□ **How long has it been since you have chosen to have regular and sustained interaction with young children?** If it's been a while, consider volunteering your services to a school, a church or a neighbor. Rather than insisting that the children see the world through your eyes, do your best to see the world through theirs.

*Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24)*

## FOUR

### Cultivating Peace in the Midst of Fragmentation

*Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. . . . Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. (Rom 14:15-17, 19)*

*For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. (Gal 3:16-18)*

**T**oward the end of my graduate work I interviewed for jobs at several academic institutions around the country. One particular year I had the good fortune of being invited to four campuses for the final round of interviews. Being wanted brought a feeling of exhilaration, and the prospect of actually securing a teaching job after so many years of preparation brought its own sense of excitement. But exhilaration and excitement were only part of the story. While flying to my second interview, I was overcome by a profound sense of cultural vertigo. I realized for the first time that I was about to land in the Midwest for a job interview at a state university, that the following week I would be on the West Coast for an interview at a large Catholic university and that shortly thereafter I would be on my way to an Ivy League institution. Moreover, each of these schools had quite different