

The Middling of the Christian Faith

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Ever wonder where the “middle class” came from? Some of us middling people are subject to a cultural and historical identity crisis. To date, there hasn’t been a solid definition offered. But, we are sure an important group—politicians vie for our attention and vote, marketers are dependent on targeting us for their products. One would think we are a very powerful group.

Problem is, it is not because we possess power that politicians and advertisers compete for our attention. No, it is our insatiable desire to feel we need something new, bigger, better—this works for politicians who promise us something better and for advertisers who promise us something new and improved. It is the middle class habits, culturally, socially, and economically that make us middling people so important to politicians and advertisers. These cultural habits are a problem, however, for the Christian middle class community, for we share these habits as well. As a consequence, there is a cost for the middling of the Christian faith.

The middle class is relatively new as a class of people. The ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ throughout history have been more distinct than they are now. In most ancient societies, being born in the ‘right’ family determined one’s status, not upward mobility, hard work, or even the freedom to ‘pursue happiness’. Education could not help because only the elite had access to formal education.

At the time of Jesus and the apostles, the Roman world consisted of the wealthy and educated elite, the poor, and slaves. There is a long history embodying a vast chasm between the working class (peasants) and the elite and land-rich. This social formation and structure held for centuries. At the time of the early church and its spread throughout Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) and into Europe, the social structure the gospel encountered was made up of the same: Upper elite, the poor (peasant-type people), and slaves. For most of world history there has not been a caste of people identified as middle class.

Some have observed that those in the old world who pursued upper-class status were once those who previously held those privileges and were a remnant of the ‘upper crust.’ In England, historians suggest that inheritance law and customs made it easier for unproductive and unfortunate children of nobility or elite families to fall into poverty. Thus for some, there was an attempt at returning to that favored status, or at least the desire to return to one’s formal privileged position. This, I find, is a harbinger of our forefather’s theory of the “pursuit of happiness,” which has promoted our social promise of upward mobility.

During what we call, the Middle Ages, a small new class emerged in the rural villages of England and France who began to possess property and a small measure of personal wealth, but were not members of the entitled aristocracy. They became known, in England, as “freeholders” from the Middle English word “frankeleyn.” America’s own Benjamin Franklin’s ancestry is linked back to this small, emerging class of non-elite families that became known as the *Middle Class*. Perhaps this is why Ben Franklin believed that America, as a new country, would draw its strength and vitality from the “middling people.”

This is both a good thing and a harmful thing: Good on the one hand, though individually still not the powerful shakers and decision-makers in our society, but collectively a powerful, social force that molds our culture and drives much of our economic patterns. Additionally, all things being equal, it is good because more people “own” a stake (and property) in our society and democracy. On the other hand, there are certain traits found among the middle class that opposes the essence of the gospel and is contrary to the Kingdom of God. In short, the trade off is the middling of the Christian faith.

Nailing down a definition of the middle class in the United States is difficult. Economists and sociologists refer to the middle class as more a state of mind than an actual economic status. Even the U.S. Census Bureau offers no official definition, although the middle 20 percent of the country earns between \$40,000 and \$95,000 a year. And you hear it all the time (especially during election time): Some Americans are worried about losing their middle class status, especially those who have endured several years of a struggling economy.

The middle class has emerged in American life as a dominant cultural force, and this has provided a new dimension for the Christian community, offering plenty of difficulty for guarding the Christian faith. The middle class has the power to elect Presidents (at least at a minimum, to determine the outcomes of many elections), make or break the successful retailing of products, and impact economic outcomes and the marketplace. Politicians target the middle class for their votes. Businesses and entrepreneurs see the middle class as a market niche. The vast majority of churches throughout the US, also, seem to appeal to those in the middle class segment of the population.

As “middling Christians,” there is a tension we must face. As David McCarthy has so clearly pointed out in his book, *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class*, there are “Two kinds of itinerancy, one is following Jesus, and the other is the restlessness of the market place.” Like our unchurched and secular middle class cousins, we are faced with our economic and social world, which is “a field of competing interests, where each of us” pursues what is good for *me* (or my family, which is a little less selfish I admit). The problem, however, is that our modern economic environment, the very one that has molded us into a middle class, encourages a mentality of dispensing what is old and acquiring what is new. In fact, as McCarthy notes, “Our modern economy requires that our attachments to people and things be superficial.” These are underlying cultural habits—which we buy into way too easily—that are damaging to our faith, and reflect more the molding of this world (Rom 12:1-2) rather than the pursuit of God’s Kingdom and His righteousness (Matt 6:33).

As middle class Christians, we must reevaluate how we interpret and express our Christian experience (not by middle class culture and values, or through the lens of middle class experience, but within it). We must learn to move beyond our attachment to the market-share of business and past our complicit relationship to the consumerism mentality within American culture. Middle class Christians should be more than a target of market-economics and political rhetoric. In contrast to consumerism, which encourages shallow relationships, we need to renew our minds so we may “rightly order our desires.” We—I should say, I—need a life that requires less “stuff.” Thus, removing us as targets for someone’s market-share, product, or political ambitions.

Some criticize the middle class as those that essentially prefer the status quo and do not have, as a social group the capacity to make significant contributions. My concern is that the same critique can be leveled at the middling Christian community as well. Like our secular and unchurched middle class neighbors, we, too, like the status quo and are unlikely to make significant counter-cultural contributions, especially one’s that would take away or diminish our cultural position, upward mobility, and pursuit of happiness. The mission of the Church is exchanged for a stable democracy. We fall for the same political and consumer pressures. We would prefer, on the one hand, that our faith not be bothered by the surrounding cultural ills, and on the other, we appreciate it when our faith doesn’t upset our cultural privileges and benefits.

As a result of the middling of the Christian faith, the middle class Christian community is faced with barriers and lifestyles and cultural habits that hinder an earnest seeking of God’s kingdom. It is hard to fulfill and live out the apostle Paul’s admonition in Colossians 3:2 to *Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth*.

Interesting, after Paul tells us to *set our minds on things above*, the following thread of commands and admonitions are concerning our earthly relationships, church-life, and work-a-day world (Col 3:5-6). The middling of the Christian faith distracts us from rightly ordering our desires and life.

Although I understand some of the perils, I am still grateful to be a member of a society where upward mobility is fostered, encouraged, and made possible. But the middling of our Christian faith has put us in a cultural place where we too easily exchange the Kingdom of God for a lesser good, the pursuit of happiness.

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