

Response to Dave Dunn's:  
"Sacred Hunger: Fasting as Economic Resistance"

-Chad Maxson

I will begin by stating my sympathies with nearly all of Mr. Dunn's concerns in this paper. Mr. Dunn's paper is another attempt to examine the genealogy of the threat of consumer capitalism and the resources the Christian faith has at its disposal to combat that threat, not only for its own sake but for the life of the world (to channel a little more Schmemmann). Mr. Dunn's attempt to deploy the practices of the Christian church against consumerism is commendable. There is a depth to human practices that deserves greater attention and exposition. I am also intrigued by the possibility of an exploration of the logic and profundity of the Christian practice of fasting, which despite its short lived notoriety of the 90s, remains a misunderstood component of Christian faith.

Partly because of these shared concerns and sympathies I was asked to respond to this paper. But I was also asked because Mr. Dunn and I fundamentally disagree on the method and manner by which these concerns are best addressed. With that in mind, all that follows does so out of an ongoing debate with my friend and occasional sparring partner.

I begin with Mr. Dunn's original presuppositions which may not be as self-evident as they appear on the surface and a more discussion may go a long way in establishing a stronger paper. For instance, while it carries a lot of rhetorical weight to claim simply, "unnecessary and excessive consumption will do us in if not restrained," and while there is certainly truth to that claim, it is not unambiguous. There is a counter sense in which excess is the very resistance to the myth of scarcity which also drives the mechanisms of consumer capitalism. This is in part what the feasts represent: the bounty and abundance of God's creation. Worship of God through the enjoyment of creation is underdeveloped in the paper. It is stated that fasts help prepare us for the coming feast(s) but it is not clear in what way they help prepare us.

Mr. Dunn's second presupposition that "when theoretical arguments, especially theological arguments [why especially?], are accepted our behaviors rarely change," seems plainly false. First off it is St. Paul who states plainly: "So faithfulness comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Romans 10.17). For Paul faithfulness is fundamentally associated with obedience (1.5). But I will secondly argue from personal experience. As a result of theological education my behavior has greatly changed. The

way I shop, manage my home, treat those I encounter in the world and the way I vote have drastically changed as a result of greater immersion in the theological discourse. Mr. Dunn suggests that practices take a more central role due to the weakness of theory and doctrine. Yet it seems from Mr. Dunn's own paper that practices themselves are greatly vulnerable to corruption and it is doctrine and theological argument that is required to keep them honest. Mr. Dunn rightly critiques the *Weigh Down Diet* because her practice does not have a theology of the feast and that it is practiced before others in clear violation of the teachings of Jesus. Practice in general, for I doubt the *Weigh Down Diet* is terribly unique, is clearly not adequate to stand against consumerism. It is precisely doctrine and Scripture that continue this prophetic work. Mr. Dunn seems to think they are not sufficiently efficacious. Should we be surprised at this? Paul recalls to us the words of Isaiah, "I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices" (Isaiah, 65.2). Efficacy has never been a great concern of God, but it *is* a great concern for capitalism which was why England's Poor Laws were developed to begin with. There were too many country folk content to provide for their livelihoods from the fruit of their lands and not contributing to the national economy. Poor Laws established a method to encourage folk to become more productive by arbitrarily establishing standards of poverty and attaching that label to the more unproductive—those who never had thought of themselves as poor before.

In regards to identity itself, there is a great ambiguity unexplored in this paper. I agree with Mr. Dunn that Christianity calls us to a new identity and a new means of attaining that identity. Here the works of cultural and social anthropologists such as Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*), Pierre Bourdieu (*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, The Logic of Practice, Outline of a Theory of Practice and Language and Symbolic Power*) and George Herbert Mead (*Mind, Self, and Society*), among others, are particularly relevant. What we find common in the works of each of these thinkers is the issue of distinction. It seems to be as old as the human race and not particularly novel to capitalism. The observation is that people seem to establish their identity based in distinction to others. This is not always as malevolent as we tend to think of it. In *Distinction* Bourdieu provides empirical research to show that one's social location (particularly economic social location) has an homogenizing tendency. It is *not* homogenous but it has this tendency. What this means is that members of the same social class and location tend to desire the same things. They tend to have similar tastes in foods, decoration,

manners, entertainment, etc. Members of a social class take pride in their tastes while disparaging the tastes of others. We see this played out among theological students all the time in their common manner of disparaging popular theology and Sunday school beliefs. We seek out ways to distinguish ourselves and this often takes the form of counter-cultural movements. Thus those anti-establishment stores in the mall actually function according to the same logic as the rest of the culture: the logic of distinction. Thus those things that I feel mark my own uniqueness such as my tastes both in terms of what I like to eat as well as what I like to wear, those things which seem to be expressions of my own unique personality, *may* actually be social structures at work in my psyche.

Mr. Dunn is concerned that our consumer culture teaches us to seek identity in what is bought and sold, but this is merely an extension of the logic of distinction which is not unique to capitalism or consumerism. For this reason it seems Mr. Dunn is treating a symptom of the problem and not the problem itself. Nor is it the case that religious praxis is the balm of Gilead for which we've sought. Religious practices have always been extremely vulnerable to the logic of distinction. We find in Matthew 23 the litany of woes against the Pharisees because their practices served to create distinctions between themselves and others and resulted in injustice and evil. We find in the Old Testament a great concern for the maintenance of a distinction between the Israelites and the Canaanites. Not only do these practices and distinctions serve to form our individual and corporate identities, they also allow us to make sense of our world. Mary Douglas explains this in her explication of the logic behind the purity codes in Leviticus. In Bourdieu this becomes clear as he takes up the criticisms people have levied against religious practices: The solemn first communion is held at a sports complex rather than in the cathedral, when women preside over the Eucharist instead of men, when traditional language is altered, when the formal address is abandoned for the familiar, etc. Formality creates the division between the sacred and the profane. Formality is a lens through which one makes sense of the world. It gives meaning to one's life within that world. Identity is defined and asserted through difference and formality establishes that difference. Religious practices largely depend upon their formality to be efficacious. When the form is changed people have a tendency to rebel and churches split. It is not silly. It is a threat to one's identity and worldview. But for this reason, religion is too often not the worship of God, but the worship of formality in the guise of ritual, and so religion becomes idolatrous and politically dangerous. This is the threat that Mr. Dunn's paper does not seem to take seriously enough. This is why the church cannot save us. Neither can baptism. Neither can the eucharist.

Neither can fasting or feasting. All of these practices depend, if not on distinction (which I think they often do—see Paul’s frustration with baptism in 1 Corinthians as an example), then on form(ality) and hence they will always tend to integrate the structured and structuring structures of culture—the *habitus*. They are not necessarily bad and perhaps often beneficial, but never salvific.

Lest it seem that distinction is purely a non-theological introduction into our discourse I conclude by turning again to Paul’s epistle to the Romans where distinction plays a huge role (as it does in many of this other epistles, e.g. 1 Corinthians and Philippians). One of the main arguments Paul makes is summarized in the statement: “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” (Romans 10. 12). In chapter 14 Paul condemns all those who create distinctions in the body, for instance those who would distinguish themselves based on what they eat. In chapter 14 Paul is concerned with quarrels over differing opinions, quarrels which threaten to divide the body. What are those opinions? Whether to eat meat or not and whether to observe special days and times or not. These things are all characteristics of diasporic Judaism. Paul certainly sees no harm in practicing these things, but they cannot become means of creating distinctions between Jews and Greeks. They cannot become central components of the Christian faith. For Paul, distinction is the occasion of evil, injustice and wickedness and thus to be challenged at every occasion. Mr. Dunn’s paper is right to challenge consumer capitalism in the name of the Christian gospel, but I contend that he misses the deeper threat (distinction—and perhaps reinscribes it!) and focuses on the minor (buying things/eating things).