



Thoughts from the Bible and Books

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“Thoughts from the Mall on Friday Afternoon”

I don't like malls. They fit somewhere between tomatoes and any show on Fox (besides sports) on my scale of dislikes. I probably like malls just slightly more than my grandpa does. After living in an idyllic rural setting most of his life, my elderly grandfather now lives in a condo across from the mall. Whenever I want to prod him, I ask whimsically, “Grandpa, I bet you like to walk around the mall during your free time, don't you?” His response is always the same. He rolls his eyes up into his bushy Dutch eyebrows as if to say “I'd sooner go back to Iwo Jima than set foot in that God forsaken place.”

I don't dislike malls quite that much. I just don't find much to do there. Besides the bookstore and the pretzel stand I find it all pretty boring—in an overwhelming sort of way.

But the mall is good for two things: walking and watching. So last Friday I left work early and went to the Meridian Mall to get a nice walk out of the rain and to do some people watching—the walking helped me stay awake to pray and the people watching helped me know how to pray.

Like it or not the mall is a snapshot of America. Just look at the stores. There are sports stores for athletes, outdoor stores for nature lovers, chic stores for big spenders, book stores for bibliophiles, grunge stores for alternateens, soap stores for moms, gadget stores for dads, toy stores for kids, diamond stores for the engaged, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.



Corporate HQ isn't stupid. And neither is the bottom line. Either your store sells or it doesn't. And if it sells it means you've managed to resemble and package a part of America people resonate with. The mall is a reflection of our spending selves.

The mall is also a multi-acre symbol of American consumerism. We venture to the mall to look at things and spend money when we aren't sure how else to spend our time—call it recreational covetousness.

The mall also demonstrates our love affair with choice. In America, we love options. Life is like a food court, or at least it should be. We want to pick and choose the perfect blend of Cajun, Chinese, and Dairy Queen for lunch just like we want our self-determined smattering of spirituality. The mall has something for everyone—you can make your own teddy bear, design your own hairstyle, and pick your own piercing.

But if we are addicted to choice, choice is also, like most addictions, a harsh task master. Who hasn't been bewildered, like I was on Friday, trying to choose among twenty-five different flavors of gumballs. I would have been happy with the flavor “red” until I knew I could have peaches n' cream, root beer float, and country apple too. In some countries people suffer from too few options. In America, we have too many—and we suffer from unnecessary anxiety, indecision, and regret as a result.

But it's not just the stores and choices at the mall that are diverse. So are the people. Go to any mall in any town and you'll probably get a picture of the area's demographic. If one group is under-represented it's prob-

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ably the poor, but even the poor can mill around the mall without buying anything. During my 90 minutes at the mall last Friday, I saw blacks, whites, Asians, and Hispanics. I saw yuppies, boomers, busters, hippies, urbanites, suburbanites, and everything in between. Almost everyone I saw was with someone else, and that someone else was almost always someone from their own tribe. In the mall, like America, most of us are surrounded by diverse groups within our own homogenous group. Perhaps “birds of a feather flock together” is bad, but it’s not new, it’s not unique to America, and it doesn’t seem to bother most people until someone tells them it should.

But the mall is more than a picture of our consumerist, choice-laden, diversified and nicheified culture. I was also reminded last Friday that the mall, like our culture, is—to use Flannery O’Conner’s phrase—Christ-haunted. We may be approaching post-Christian, but sneak a peak through the 10-40 window and you’ll see that post-Christian looks a whole lot different than un-Christian. At the “God-forsaken” mall, I can still buy cross jewelry, a Bible in a dozen English translations, scores of Christian CDs, hundreds of Christian books, and a million decorations for Christmas. And in a couple weeks I’ll be able to hear Christmas music—mostly White Christmasy stuff, but also Joy to the World I imagine. On this Friday, the mall muzak machine afforded me no fewer than three Christ-Haunted songs: An Indigo Girl’s song that talked of Christian belief, but rejected it; Marc Cohn’s Walking in Memphis (“Tell me are you a Christian child? And I said ‘Ma’am I am tonight.’”); and Tom Petty’s Free Fallin’ (“She’s a good girl, loves her mama; loves Jesus and America too.”). I’m pretty sure no one got saved, but the music was a reminder to me of the place Jesus still has in our national consciousness. Like a haunted house with creatures lurking in the dark, Christ still haunts our often ungodly culture and is ready to redeem her unsuspecting cohorts.

But there are four types of people that have an especially hard time hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd amidst the cacophony of cultural ghouls and goblins. The first is the Spiritual Pluralist. The good thing about being post-Christian is that you can still purchase a Bible at Schullers. The bad thing about being *post-Christian* is that the Christian shelf is just one of a hundred shelves in the store. Now there’s nothing wrong with shelving Bibles, Koran, and Tarot

readings together, except that the spiritual pluralist looks at spirituality as he would a mall book store. There’s something for everyone. Whatever helps you is fine for you. There is no absolute, just options; no overarching virtue, just values; no grand story, just stories. If the cross fits, wear it. If the Lotus Sutra fits, wear that instead, or better yet, wear that too.

The second person who has a hard time hearing the call of Christ is the American Dreamer. She is a good neighbor, with a friendly attitude and all the kitchen appliances you could ever want to borrow. She is successful, ambitious, and likes the mall. But Christianity is like Joy to World in the mall at Christmas; it’s the background music for her life. It soothes, but doesn’t save.

The third person is the Presumptively Evangelized. He knows Christianity, but not really. He might even believe in Jesus and the Bible, but he doesn’t understand sin, judgment, Christ, the gospel, or what it means to be saved and follow Jesus. He thinks he’s a Christian when he’s not, which is bad enough. But worse, all the Christians think he’s saved too. At the very least, they think he’s evangelized. But he’s not. That’s what hit me hardest on my Friday afternoon in the mall. “Everyone in this building has heard of Jesus” I thought, “but how many have actually heard the story of creation, fall, redemption, re-creation?”

Which leads to the fourth type of person. This person doesn’t have a hard time hearing Christ’s call of salvation. What he can’t hear is the call to evangelization. The fourth person is us, the Comfortably Christian. We presume too much about our fellow walkers in the mall and we share too little.

So how do we proclaim Christ clearly in a culture that understands him so ambiguously? To be honest, I’m not sure. Cold call evangelism can work. Tracks have their place. Inviting to church is good. But it seems like we need more. Surely training is part of it. But we also need a plan. Maybe we need, dare I say it, a program. Something to arouse less cursing the darkness and more lighting the candle. Something that is faithful to the gospel and sensitive to the world we live in.

Got any ideas? I’m all ears. And so, perhaps, are the masses of mall goers who do not treasure Jesus in this Christ-haunted land.