

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

Levi's for Lent

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Among those of us who call ourselves by the name of “Christian,” what is it that most profoundly shapes our identity? What is the story by which we live? The fact that we’re observing Lent in some way suggests one answer: we live by the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Lent we travel with Jesus towards Jerusalem, and remind ourselves once more of the truth of our baptism: the new life we have in Christ is lived under the sign of the cross. Here is our identity, this is our story.

Well, possibly. But we’d be fooling ourselves if we left it at that. Lent often appears - at least in contemporary Protestantism - as a desperate annual attempt to give some distinctive shape to our otherwise chaotic and formless Christian lives. Its most important function today, perhaps, is to alert us to the extent of our abandonment of this story in favor of something altogether more compelling and seductive...

A couple stand by the side of a lonely road. Their car has broken down. The Woman paces impatiently beside it as a bespectacled Failure in a suit tries without success to raise the hood. A pickup truck rolls into view - salvation is at hand.

*“The night we met you know I needed you so,
And if I had the chance I’d never let you go.”*

Out steps Our Hero, all muscle and blue denims. He makes eye contact with The Woman. Electricity passes between them. He has no problem raising the hood. The Failure burns his hand on the radiator cap, but Our Hero knows what to do. He removes his neckerchief and uses it to loosen the cap. Water spurts onto the ground between The Failure’s feet.

*“So won’t you say you love me,
I’ll make you so proud of me.”*

Now Our Hero removes his belt and unbuttons his jeans. The Failure, covered with embarrassment, quickly slams down the hood and tries to protect The Woman from the progressive revelation taking place behind him. He fails, and she takes a good look at the bulging boxer shorts. Our Hero beckons to her, and she willingly joins him in the pickup truck. The Failure climbs disconsolately into his own car.

*“Be my, Be my Baby,
Be my, Be my Darling,
Be my, Be my Baby now.”*

The truck moves off, pulling the car with it. The jeans act as a makeshift tow rope. Our Hero looks across at The Woman. He depresses the gear stick and accelerates. The jeans tear down the middle, leaving The Failure stranded on the open road. Our Hero

and The Woman exchange contented glances and drive off into the sunset.

"LEVI'S 501. SEPARATES THE MEN FROM THE BOYS."

It's just a commercial. We certainly don't intend to take this story seriously. Lighten up!

Yet advertisements confront us almost everywhere we go - on the highway, at the ball game, in the newspapers and magazines, and, most prolifically, on television. They have been with us all our lives, imposing themselves on the landscapes of the mind. As early as 1914 Walter Lippmann could write that,

The eastern sky [is] ablaze with chewing gum, the northern with tooth-brushes and underwear, the western with whiskey, and the southern with petticoats, the whole heavens... [are] brilliant with monstrosly flirtatious women....When you glance at magazines... [a] rivulet of text trickles through the meadows of automobiles, baking powders, corsets and kodaks.¹

The number of commercials that the average American is exposed to in a lifetime is quite staggering. More than a fifth of all tv time is devoted to advertisements, so that in an evening's viewing it's quite possible to see fifty or sixty of them. By the time American children reach the age of eighteen, they will have seen literally hundreds of thousands of tv commercials. Given this remarkable quantity, it is interesting to ask what provides the real continuity on American television: are the commercials breaks in the programming, or are the programs interludes between the commercials? Whatever the answer, there can be no question but that commercials are part of the central story told by television.

What is the story by which we live? Commercials offer us a story line to which we are exposed day in, day out, week in, week out, year in, year out. Their power lies precisely in the images by which they present and define human reality. As Christopher Lasch has pointed out, in contemporary advertising description of a product or its merits is secondary, if it is present at all:

In a simpler time, advertising merely called attention to the product and extolled its advantages. Now it manufactures a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious and bored. Advertising serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life.²

In a very real sense, we are the products of advertising. The key concept here is that of anxiety. Commercials play on all our deep and age-old anxieties about health and popularity, meaning, and sexual potency; and they point the way into the promised land by means of consumption.

The Levi's ad is, of course, funny. Many commercials are, indeed, far more entertaining and well-crafted than the programs in which they appear. But the humor is meant to blind us to the fact that something pretty perverse is happening here.

On the surface it's the familiar story of boy 1 meets girl who dumps boy 2 in favour of the newer model. The characters are all stereotypes: Our Hero is a hunk, The Failure is a wimp, The Woman is fickle. We know that the message is "hunks wear Levi's." But there is something deeper going on here that this version of the

commercial's message does not fully confront.

The images in the ad are carefully chosen so that we link sexual potency with Levi's. The man in the suit is not just a bore and a wimp. When we first see him he is struggling - at groin level, and without success - to raise the hood of his car. At some level of our being we register the fact: he cannot do what a man is supposed to do. Our Hero manages it immediately. It is the first sign of his mastery of the situation. The Failure tries to reassert his power by touching part of the engine, but finds it too hot to handle. Once more Our Hero proves his superior potency by putting his hand on The Failure's engine and removing the radiator cap. The image of water dripping onto the ground as The Failure looks down in dismay is clearly meant to suggest that he has wet himself. When Our Hero drops his pants and reveals the extent of his manliness, The Failure reacts by quickly closing the hood, as if to conceal the absence of his. The castration motif becomes almost explicit when The Failure's car is left behind: Our Hero grabs the gear stick violently, the jeans split right through the crotch, and The Failure is left impotent and alone on the road to nowhere.

Is this a fanciful interpretation? I don't think so. There are plenty of examples of this kind of imagery being employed by advertisers.³ These are the images which we are feeding ourselves and our children. They are constantly trying to tell us who we are and what we are worth. We rarely question them, or even look at them carefully. Yet they are the constant accompaniment of our lives, and they are certainly not neutral with respect to the gospel.

In a recent published conversation between Neil Postman and Camille Paglia, both of them important critics of popular culture, Postman expresses the fear that the deluge of advertising images in contemporary society has a secularising effect: symbols are drained of meaning, banishing God and a sense of the sacred from the world. Paglia's response to this is fascinating, and gets, I think, to the heart of the issue:

To you, coming from the Judeo-Christian tradition, this looks secular. If you look at it from my perspective, *popular culture is an eruption of paganism* [my italics] - which is also a sacred style....So it's not that the sacred has been lost or is being trivialised. We are steeped in idolatry. The sacred is everywhere. I don't see any secularism. We've returned to the age of polytheism. It's a rebirth of the pagan gods.⁴

For her, the forces that drive popular culture - the cinema, advertising, rock videos, soap operas, etc., - are essentially pagan "expressive of nature's sex and violence."⁵ I think Paglia the Pagan is right, though I cannot share her enthusiasm for this "eruption of paganism." In advertising we are witnessing the investiture of products with mystical powers and sacred significance. The underlying themes of so many of the commercials are those of power, manipulation, and sexual potency.

The multiplicity of commercials does not pose some kind of philosophical or theoretical threat to the Christian faith: it throws down a direct spiritual challenge. To whom do we belong? Who are we? Whom do we serve? The perspectives and attitudes operative in so many of the commercials fly in the face of biblical teaching on the nature and goal of human existence. They promote not simply misunderstanding or wrong doctrine, but spiritual enslavement.

In the Epistle to the Galatians, Paul contrasts what might be seen as two fundamental stories of human existence:

Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal.5:19-22).

One story represents the ad man's dream, the other the Christian vision. One describes the world according to the Levi's commercial, the other the journey that is Lent. What is the story by which we live?

NOTES

¹. W. Lippmann, quoted in Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 43.

². C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1978), 72.

³. See, e.g., the examples cited in Ewen, 47-51, and Mark Crispin Miller, *Boxed In* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 43-50.

⁴. C. Paglia and N. Postman, "She wants her TV! He wants his book!" *Harper's Magazine*, March 1991, 49.

⁵. *Ibid.*, 45.