

Living by kinship, not consumption

When I'm tempted to click "Add to cart," I hear creation groaning.

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue



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“All creation groans.” Paul’s phrase has been ringing in my ears lately. I go back to Romans 8 and read of “creation’s futility” and Paul’s call away from a life in the flesh to a life in the Spirit. I can see why so many have read those words and thought we need to escape the want of our bodies, escape the constant pulls for power. “Let’s simply desire the love of God,” some might say, as though God’s love is a spiritual getaway.

I feel like I can hear those groans Paul talks about when I open my garage to begin some spring-cleaning and am almost toppled by piles of boxes and balled up plastic bags that never made their way back to the store. A few minutes later I give up and sit in the sun, scrolling on my phone, hovering over a new pair of shoes in my size and favorite color, rationalizing why I could click “Add to cart.”

I suspect these piles of boxes and the lure of off-white Nike Pegasus with a green swoosh are not unrelated to the news of mass shootings, racial violence, and governmental gridlock. *Add to cart.* Wait for a little dollop of joy to arrive on my doorstep, and let the world melt away for a moment. And creation groans.

Rereading Romans 8, I was brought back to the dualism of the flesh and spirit that formed my early days as a Christian. I had read these passages as a kind of call to ascetic spirituality. Flesh was the source of sinful desires; my body needed to be controlled, disciplined, feared. And spirit was a kind of disembodied hope. Underneath this hope was the idea that we are most like God’s Spirit when we are least like the world around us. As spiritual beings we must protect ourselves from it or conquer it. It’s easy to see what this posture does to our relationship to the world around us. Everything is to be feared, conquered, or put to use.

But I came to learn that the word for “flesh” in Romans 8 does not equate my body with sin. Richard Rohr writes that the Greek word *sarx* is best understood as ego: a conception of the self as unrelated to others. It is not the body itself or the created world but rather a posture toward God, the world, and one’s self. Likewise, life in the Spirit is not devoid of creation or the material world—it too is about one’s posture.

I wonder if when Paul says “flesh” he might mean, *You are living in a society that is asking you to consume or to be content being consumed. Empire wants all of you, but there is another way.*

In our day we may not have a Caesar, but we do live in a world where the things we consume are sometimes inevitable and necessary but oftentimes a means to escape, to feel, to numb, to claim some semblance of agency, to assert control or signal prestige. *Add to cart.* And we add to the world’s futility, and she groans from a condition not of her own making.

But we are groaning, too, as we surround ourselves with things that feel more and more distant from us, that draw us farther and farther away from each other. All of it fills the earth with things the earth cannot absorb or use. Maybe Paul means, *Don’t*

*live according to the flesh—do not live according to the patterns of accumulation, of use, of disposability.*

In the face of this, Paul calls us to a life in the Spirit. This life is not devoid of the material. A life in the Spirit is adoption as children. To live according to the Spirit is to see our interconnectedness, our kinship.

Kinship is different from consumption because it is not so easily reproduced. It is more carefully considered. It is nurtured, repaired, and valued because it is a part of who we are. When Paul goes on to say “all things work together” (Rom. 8:28), it’s a statement about all that is: there is nothing that is disposable. All things are working within God’s life.

Recognizing this caused me to return to another part of my garage (and basement, and closet) where I have little stockpiles of random bits—bike parts, screws of all kinds, scraps of wood, cardboard, old wire, and so on. Whenever the kids have an art project—or there’s a repair to be made around the house, or it’s Halloween—I’m working through my little inventory. Can I use this? What possibilities of life exist in the things in my midst?

I have come to take great satisfaction in repurposing things. It is a strangely spiritual practice—repurposing, making new, letting the things that were seemingly broken become the means to repair.

A life with God is not so easy as “Don’t participate in the capitalist machine” on the one hand or “All things are permitted!” on the other. When facing the catastrophe of mass production and quick fashion, we could easily demonize other people’s shopping choices. But maybe a life in the Spirit is more about the nurture and care with which we tend to what we already have—and the hope we have for what’s in our life already, even as we are always prepared to make room for the new. As we attend to the things in our life as a kind of kinship, I wonder if that might translate into how we see the world, how we see one another.