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“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Surrendering the American dream. For the first two-plus centuries of our republic, America has by and large been defined by a Gospel of Wealth. In many ways, *wealth* has been descriptive of our *American experiment in the new world*.

Indeed, when Europeans first settled North America, they saw the richness of our natural resources and concluded two things: that God’s plan for creation could be realized here and that they could all get rich while helping God do it.

From early on, we were the land of *milk and honey*, the land of virtually unlimited abundance. In our formative days, when we found our neighbors or surroundings disagreeable, we simply moved on beyond the next horizon. In the last half century, our sense of wealth gave way to what we eagerly called *the American Dream*. It was a dream of materialism, a dream rooted in our powers of acquisition made possible by the vastness of our resources.

The cornerstone of this dream, to be sure, was to own our own home. Home ownership was the lynchpin to *the good life* and to a lasting security beyond retirement.

As *the good life* became more possible for increasing numbers of people, over time, churches, too, got caught up in wealth-acquisition’s calling. Differing forms of the Gospel of Wealth came into vogue. In the seventies on into the nineties, there was Robert Shuller’s *Possibility Thinking* where the cross was seen more as a *plus sign* than a symbol of suffering love.

In recent years, it’s been *the Prosperity Gospel* of Joel Osteen which suggests not only that God loves us and forgives us, but that God wants believers to have the material stuff of *the good life* as well.

Of course, with the worst economic crisis since The Great Depression in the thirties still raging, attitudes and thinking on the Gospel of Wealth are adapting and adjusting to the realities of these harsh economic times.

The Gospel of restraint. In the wake of this recent unfolding, a short time ago, megachurch pastor David Platt came out with a new book with a stunning title: *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*.

Imagine that! I say this because megachurch pastors are generally all caught up in the Gospel of Wealth in the way they present their message to their immediate community and to the world.

More importantly, most megachurches are not lacking in resources and, therefore, are easily tempted by the lure and the abundance of the “*American dream*” wider culture in which we live.

Perhaps one of the benefits of these austere economic times will be the gradual surrendering of the *Gospel of Wealth* to a more aptly phrased *Gospel of Restraint*, an interpretation of Christian faith more in line with Jesus’ primary teachings in *the Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7).

A *Gospel of Restraint* would emphasize a more tempered life-style, a life-style with a distinct element of sacrifice and generosity of spirit. In the years ahead, such a Gospel could help redefine the *American dream*, pulling us away from greedy impulses that compromise our soul while opening us to the fruits of the spirit realized through the values of sharing, cooperation and giving ourselves to the needs of the whole.

Given the amount of the earth’s resources we consume in the United States, a new era marked by restraint might be just what we and the rest of the planet need. In many ways, *the American dream* has always been an illusion—that our deepest needs are satisfied through accumulated wealth and endless materialism.

David Platt calls upon his readers to *cap their lifestyle. Live as if you made \$50,000*, he says, *and give everything else away*. He invites us to adopt a life-style of surrender—surrender to anything that exalts materialism and a bending towards excess.

Certainly, one of the challenges of the first decades of the 21st century will be in how America responds to this new code of restraint that is increasingly upon us.