

OPEN CHRISTIAN PRESS

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE AGE

*Exposing Modern Deceptions, Counterfeit Christianity, and the
Church's Captivity to the Spirit of the Age*

PART I

THE SPIRIT AND INTELLECTUAL
ARCHITECTURE OF THE AGE

CHAPTER 5

The Sovereign Self, Hedonism, Consumerism, and Therapeutic Salvation

Prof. Sixbert SANGWA

Open Christian University | Center for Faith and Work
ORCID 0000-0001-8650-1444 | ssangwa@openchristian.education

Edited by Prof. Dr. Placide Mutabazi

First Open Christian Press edition, 2026

Open Christian Press, an Open Christian University imprint
books.openchristian.education

CHAPTER PUBLICATION METADATA

Abstract

This chapter examines the practical anthropology that emerges when the Creator is excluded and the autonomous self becomes the highest moral authority. Building upon the preceding analysis of modernism, the genealogy of autonomy, the war over truth, and metaphysical naturalism, it argues that inward desire increasingly functions as revelation, pleasure as purpose, consumption as identity, entertainment as liturgy, comfort as heaven, and psychological affirmation as a counterfeit form of salvation. The chapter distinguishes legitimate agency from self-sovereignty, lawful enjoyment from hedonism, ordinary commerce from consumerism, restorative care from therapeutic ideology, and trauma-informed compassion from the erasure of moral responsibility. It traces the development of expressive individualism from ancient philosophies of pleasure through Romantic inwardness, modern self-authorship, mass advertising, the therapeutic revolution, and platform-mediated identity. Contemporary evidence concerning gambling, gaming, reward learning, social media, consumer credit, materialism, loneliness, and African youth betting is used cautiously, with correlation distinguished from causation and ordinary recreation distinguished from clinically significant disorder. Through sustained exegesis of [Luke 9:23-25](#), [Luke 12:13-34](#), [Romans 6:12-23](#), [Philippians 3:17-21](#), [2 Timothy 3:1-5](#), and related passages, the chapter shows that biblical self-denial is not self-hatred but the dethronement of the fallen self, and that Christian joy is not hostility to pleasure but pleasure ordered beneath worship, holiness, stewardship, neighbour-love, and eternity. The chapter addresses wounded people, those experiencing addiction, the poor, the affluent, young people, parents, pastors, clinicians, educators, and Christian entrepreneurs with differentiated correction, warning, compassion, and hope. It concludes that the sovereign self cannot bear the weight of godhood and calls the church to repentance, contentment, self-control, responsible care, faithful discipleship, and readiness for Christ's return.

Keywords: sovereign self; expressive individualism; hedonism; consumerism; therapeutic culture; biblical self-denial; Christian contentment

Publication details

Book: The Gospel According to the Age: Exposing Modern Deceptions, Counterfeit Christianity, and the Church's Captivity to the Spirit of the Age

Chapter: Chapter 5: The Sovereign Self, Hedonism, Consumerism, and Therapeutic Salvation

Author: Prof. Sixbert SANGWA

Book editor: Prof. Dr. Placide Mutabazi

Publisher: Open Christian Press, an Open Christian University imprint

Edition: First edition

Publication year: 2026

Language: English

Suggested citation

Sangwa, S. (2026). The sovereign self, hedonism, consumerism, and therapeutic salvation. In P. Mutabazi (Ed.), *The Gospel According to the Age: Exposing modern deceptions, counterfeit Christianity, and the church's captivity to the spirit of the age* (Chapter 5). Open Christian Press.

Rights and Scripture notice

Copyright © 2026 Sixbert Sangwa. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the publisher, except as permitted by applicable copyright law. Scripture quotations marked CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Publisher: books.openchristian.education | editor@openchristian.education

When the Market Learns the Heart's Name

A generation can be surrounded by pleasure and still be unable to rejoice. It can possess more entertainment than ancient emperors imagined and remain frightened of silence. It can carry libraries, cinemas, shops, casinos, counsellors, admirers, and marketplaces in a pocket, yet become restless whenever the screen grows dark. It can spend tomorrow's income on today's image, gamble the money needed for food, travel for photographs while neglecting ageing parents, and call every interruption of desire an assault on freedom. The banquet is crowded, the table glitters, and the soul goes home hungry.

The contradiction is not accidental. Many modern systems do not merely satisfy desire. They study it, cultivate it, compare it, predict it, and sell it back to the person as identity. Advertising learns insecurity. Platforms learn attention. Credit systems learn impatience. Betting companies learn hope under economic strain. Influencers learn aspiration. Therapeutic language learns pain. None of these institutions is uniformly evil, and none possesses a single hidden intention. Yet together they can form an environment in which the person is continually told that fulfilment lies one purchase, one journey, one relationship, one promotion, one treatment, one notification, or one reinvention away.

Prof. Sangwa has described this environment as an orchard of painted fruit. The colours are vivid, the fragrance engineered, and the promise immediate, but the bite cannot nourish the soul (Sangwa, 2026b). The image deserves extension. The modern market does not merely display fruit. It follows the traveller through the orchard, records which branches attract his eyes, changes the colour of the next fruit, offers credit when his purse is empty, and sends a reminder after midnight. What previous societies called temptation has been industrialised, personalised, and made portable.

Chapter 1 established that the gospel according to the age transfers final authority from God and His revelation to autonomous humanity. Chapter 2 traced the spiritual and intellectual genealogy of that transfer. Chapter 3 showed how transferred authority produces a war over truth, language, and the right to name reality. Chapter 4 entered the laboratory and clinic, distinguishing disciplined science from the scientific claim that nature is all that exists. Its concluding question now becomes unavoidable. If humanity is autonomous matter in a self-contained universe, what is life for?

Pleasure, comfort, consumption, recognition, and psychological wellbeing are among the nearest available answers. They are not inherently sinful. Food, rest, beauty, medical treatment, friendship, recreation, celebration, travel, skilled counselling, and material provision may be received with gratitude. The deception begins when gifts become governors, when desire becomes an interpreter, when comfort becomes a moral entitlement, and when emotional relief is confused with reconciliation to God.

The controlling thesis of this chapter is that the sovereign self turns ordinary goods into counterfeit salvation. Inward desire becomes a source of identity. Pleasure becomes an apparent measure of the good. Consumption becomes a method of constructing and displaying the self. Entertainment becomes escape from creaturely duty. Therapy becomes a doctrine of justification in which affirmation replaces correction and comfort replaces obedience. These promises frequently deepen the

very conditions they claim to cure: appetite without satisfaction, connection without communion, choice without wisdom, credit without stewardship, visibility without love, and self-expression without a stable self.

The biblical alternative is neither joyless repression nor contempt for the person. It is liberation from the impossible burden of self-rule. Jesus Christ does not annihilate the self. He rescues it from its false throne, forgives its guilt, heals its wounds, orders its loves, joins it to His body, and prepares it for resurrection. Self-denial is not the gospel's hatred of humanity. It is mercy toward a creature being crushed beneath a crown it was never designed to wear.

The Sovereign Self and Its Counterfeit Freedom

Agency Is Not Autonomy

Human beings are moral agents. Scripture addresses them as persons who hear, reason, choose, promise, obey, rebel, repent, and answer before God. Biblical faith does not reduce the individual to a passive instrument of family, tradition, state, pastor, market, or crowd. Conscience matters. Personal responsibility matters. The abused person may resist wicked control. The believer must test teaching. The citizen may expose corruption. The child who matures becomes accountable for choices that cannot be permanently assigned to parents.

The sovereign self is something more than agency. It is the modern conception of the individual as the primary author, interpreter, judge, and protector of identity, morality, desire, meaning, and life purpose. The person does not merely exercise judgment beneath God. The self claims final jurisdiction. External authorities, including body, family, church, tradition, nature, and Scripture, are accepted insofar as they validate the inward project and rejected when they contradict it.

This sovereignty is often expressed through apparently compassionate commands: follow your heart, be true to yourself, protect your peace, live your truth, remove every toxic person, and do what makes you happy. Each statement can carry a legitimate warning. A person should not live by hypocrisy. Manipulative relationships require boundaries. Abusers should not be granted unlimited access. Genuine vocation should not be strangled by mere social expectation. Rest can be necessary. Pain can disclose injustice.

The problem lies in the unstated court of appeal. Which heart should be followed when the heart is divided? Which self is the true self when desires conflict? Who defines toxicity? Does peace mean reconciliation with God or insulation from correction? Can an action become righteous merely because it feels authentic? Jeremiah's warning that the heart is deceitful does not mean every feeling is false, but it does mean no feeling is infallible ([Jeremiah 17:9-10](#)). The modern slogan ordinarily assumes what Scripture denies: that the deepest inward impulse is morally authoritative because it is inward.

Sangwa's *When the Mirror Becomes a Throne* traces the movement from lawful self-awareness toward a civic liturgy in which the self becomes author, judge, and saviour (Sangwa, 2026d). The distinction is decisive. A mirror helps a person see. A throne authorises a person to rule. Self-knowledge is a discipline of truth. Self-sovereignty is a claim of lordship.

Expressive Individualism

The language of expressive individualism helps explain how the inward self acquired this authority. Bellah et al. (1985) used the term to describe a moral vocabulary in which personal fulfilment and the expression of a unique inner identity assume central importance. Taylor (1989, 1991) traced the modern ideal of authenticity through the inward turn, while also warning that authenticity becomes thin and self-defeating when severed from horizons of significance beyond personal choice. Trueman (2020), drawing upon Taylor, Rieff, and MacIntyre, argues that psychological identity increasingly requires public recognition of inward desire.

Expressive individualism is attractive because imposed identities can be unjust. Families can demand careers that serve status rather than calling. Cultures can silence women, stigmatise disability, protect ethnic hierarchy, or treat poverty as shame. Churches can confuse tradition with revelation. Employers can consume a worker's life. Political regimes can assign worth according to usefulness or loyalty. The recovery of conscience, voice, and personal agency may therefore correct real oppression.

Yet the cure becomes another captivity when the inward self is treated as self-originating. No person created his body, language, family, historical moment, dependencies, mortality, or need for love. Even the vocabulary used to announce individuality is learned from communities and platforms. The declaration "I define myself" is made with borrowed words, before an audience whose recognition is still required. The sovereign self therefore possesses an unstable sovereignty. It claims independence while depending upon affirmation.

This dependence explains why disagreement can feel like erasure. If identity rests upon self-construction, correction threatens more than conduct. It appears to threaten existence. Institutions are then pressured to move from tolerating the person to certifying the person's interpretation of reality. The self announces absolute independence and immediately demands public confirmation. It is a monarch who cannot sleep unless the crowd continues applauding.

A Counterfeit Religion of the Self

The sovereign self operates religiously because it supplies an account of authority, guilt, justification, ritual, community, and hope. The self becomes sanctuary. Desire functions as revelation. Authenticity becomes confession. Consumption acts as sacrament. Entertainment supplies liturgy. Affirmation offers justification. Therapy can assume a priestly role. Visibility becomes glory. Personal reinvention imitates resurrection. Comfort serves as heaven, while contradiction, exclusion, or discomfort is treated as hell.

These are analogies, not claims that every therapist, purchase, or social-media post is an act of formal worship. Their value lies in exposing functional ultimacy. A good becomes religious when it carries the weight of identity, innocence, security, and salvation. The question is not merely whether a person attends church. It is what cannot be questioned, what must be protected at any cost, what promises life, and what produces despair when removed.

The paradox is severe. The sovereign self is frequently governed by appetites it did not choose, advertisements it did not design, debts that constrain its future,

platforms that study its behaviour, wounds it has not healed, and audiences it cannot control. The person rejects obedience to God as slavery, then obeys a notification at midnight. He refuses the command to give, yet serves interest payments for years. She rejects modest limits as oppression, yet submits body, time, and image to an industry that profits from insecurity. The self leaves the Father's house seeking freedom and discovers that the far country has employers.

From the Garden to the Branded Self

Pleasure Before Modernity

Hedonism did not begin with smartphones. Ancient philosophers debated whether pleasure is the good, what kind of pleasure deserves pursuit, and how desire should be governed. Epicurus is often caricatured as a preacher of reckless indulgence. In fact, he valued tranquillity, friendship, moderation, and freedom from fear, distinguishing natural and necessary desires from vain ones (Epicurus, 1994). His system nevertheless sought peace within a cosmos in which the gods did not judge human beings and death ended sensation. Salvation required release from religious fear rather than reconciliation with the Creator.

Modern utilitarian traditions placed pleasure and pain within moral calculation. Bentham's principle of utility assessed actions according to their tendency to increase happiness, while Mill developed a more qualitative account of higher and lower pleasures (Bentham, 1789/2007; Mill, 1863/2001). Utilitarian reasoning has contributed to serious attention to suffering and public welfare. Its limitation appears when the good is reduced to aggregate consequences without a sufficient account of inviolable dignity, holy obligation, or acts that remain wrong even when a majority benefits.

The biblical disagreement with hedonism is not that pleasure never matters. God created sensory life. Scripture speaks of feasting, marital delight, music, harvest, friendship, rest, and the joy of salvation. The disagreement concerns lordship. Pleasure can accompany the good, but it cannot define the good. A surgeon may cause pain to heal. A liar may enjoy deception. An adulterous relationship may feel intense. A martyr may suffer while doing right. A mother may endure exhaustion for a child. The sensation alone cannot decide the moral meaning.

The Inward Turn

Romanticism reacted against cold rationalism and social convention by exalting feeling, imagination, nature, and the authentic interior life. Its protest exposed a genuine reduction of the person to mechanism or social role. Yet the moral centre increasingly moved inward. Nietzsche later rejected inherited Christian morality and envisioned self-overcoming and value creation. Freud interpreted civilisation as requiring the restraint of instinct and examined the psychic costs of repression. Existentialism emphasised choice, responsibility, and the creation of meaning within a world that offered no ready-made essence.

These traditions differ profoundly. They should not be gathered into one accusation. Their common relevance lies in the expanding authority of the psychological interior. The person is increasingly understood through inward desire,

conflict, authenticity, and self-fashioning rather than primarily through creaturehood, covenant, duty, and a received moral order.

Rieff (1966) described the emergence of “psychological man,” for whom liberation from inherited sacred order becomes a central cultural task. Lasch (1979) later analysed a culture increasingly organised around image, recognition, insecurity, and therapeutic survival. MacIntyre (2007) argued that modern moral discourse retains fragments of older traditions while losing a shared account of human purpose. Under these conditions, choice itself acquires moral prestige because agreement about the ends of life has weakened.

Mass Consumption and the Manufacture of Want

Industrial production created an economic problem that premodern scarcity rarely faced at the same scale: goods had to be sold continuously. Advertising no longer merely announced availability. It attached products to status, romance, competence, youth, belonging, and identity. Veblen’s analysis of conspicuous consumption showed how goods communicate social position (Veblen, 1899/2007). Bernays (1928) openly described the shaping of public desire as a feature of mass society. Later consumer culture refined this craft through market research, celebrity endorsement, personalised data, and behavioural experimentation.

The market can serve human flourishing. Trade coordinates skills. Marketing helps buyers discover useful products. Branding can communicate quality and accountability. Credit can finance productive investment. Economic growth can reduce deprivation. The Christian critique is not a romantic return to subsistence or hostility to enterprise.

Consumerism is different from consumption. It is a moral and cultural system in which acquisition and experience carry identity, belonging, emotional relief, and status. The consumer does not simply buy shoes. He buys confidence. She does not simply book travel. She purchases a story about the kind of person she is. A device becomes membership in a future. A vehicle becomes social rank. A ceremony becomes proof that a family is honourable. A ministry product becomes evidence of spiritual access.

The system depends upon planned dissatisfaction, whether or not every firm consciously uses that phrase. A satisfied consumer replaces slowly. An insecure consumer returns quickly. Products are therefore surrounded by narratives of insufficiency: your body is unfinished, your home outdated, your phone embarrassing, your holiday ordinary, your children under-equipped, your career invisible, your worship experience dull. The market does not always sell water. It sells thirst.

The Therapeutic Revolution

The therapeutic turn sought to relieve real suffering. Mental illness had been misunderstood, stigmatised, hidden, or punished. Trauma was ignored. Children were shamed. Victims were instructed to remain silent. Religious communities sometimes treated depression as mere prayerlessness, psychosis as simple rebellion, or abuse as a private matter to be endured. Professional care, clinical research, medication, counselling, and trauma-informed practice have helped many people live with greater safety and functioning.

The problem arises when therapeutic categories become a total anthropology. Smith and Denton (2005) famously described “moralistic therapeutic deism” among American adolescents: a thin religion in which God supports happiness and intervenes mainly when needed. The concept does not describe every young person or every church, but it names a recognisable pattern. God remains useful, morality remains vague, and the highest practical aim becomes feeling good about oneself.

Therapeutic salvation changes the diagnosis of the human condition. Sin becomes dysfunction. Guilt becomes low self-esteem. Repentance becomes shame. Correction becomes invalidation. Obedience becomes repression. Suffering becomes failure. Emotional relief becomes redemption. The cross is retained as a symbol of divine reassurance but emptied of judgment, substitution, self-denial, and the death of the old self.

Sangwa's *When the Serpent Learns to Whisper Wellness* warns that deception can arrive through the language of healing, alignment, inner peace, and self-discovery while quietly displacing the cross (Sangwa, 2026e). The chapter does not require us to suspect every wellness practice. It requires us to ask whether wellbeing is being pursued as stewardship beneath God or salvation apart from Him.

The Platform-Mediated Self

Digital platforms unite expressive individualism, consumerism, entertainment, and therapeutic affirmation in one environment. The user curates identity, consumes content, seeks recognition, purchases experiences, receives advice, and measures response. The International Telecommunication Union estimated that 6 billion people, about 74 percent of the world's population, were online in 2025 (International Telecommunication Union, 2025). Connectivity has enlarged education, commerce, communication, ministry, emergency response, and access to knowledge. It has also expanded the scale at which attention can be measured and monetised.

The platform is not merely a neutral pipe. Design choices shape visibility and repetition. Notifications interrupt. Infinite scroll removes stopping cues. Social rewards arrive unpredictably. Personalisation narrows the field of attention. Influencers merge friendship language with advertising. A person may therefore experience life increasingly as content, relationships as audiences, and the self as a brand requiring continuous maintenance.

Sangwa's warning that the phone can become an altar should be understood functionally, not superstitiously (Sangwa, 2025). The device is capable of carrying Scripture, sustaining distant relationships, enabling work, and widening education. Yet a tool becomes a master when it commands attention, displaces duty, trains appetite, and makes silence unbearable. Paul's principle remains exact: “I will not be mastered by anything” ([1 Corinthians 6:12](#)).

Hedonism and the Industrialisation of Desire

What Hedonism Means

Hedonism appears in several forms. Psychological hedonism claims that human beings always seek pleasure and avoid pain. Ethical hedonism claims that pleasure is

the highest good or the proper aim of action. Philosophical hedonism develops formal arguments about wellbeing. Consumer hedonism pursues stimulation, novelty, and identity through goods and experiences. Digital hedonism organises attention around rapid, repeated, personalised rewards. These forms overlap, but they should not be confused.

The ordinary enjoyment of a meal, a match, a journey, a game, a film, a song, a well-made garment, or a restful afternoon is not automatically hedonism. Scripture does not command colourless existence. The relevant question is not whether pleasure occurred, but whether pleasure governs. Has the activity mastered the person? Does it displace prayer, work, family, health, generosity, or obedience? Is it pursued at unjust cost? Does it require secrecy, deception, sexual impurity, intoxication, or neglect? Can it be received with thanksgiving and relinquished without rage? Does it strengthen or weaken love of God and neighbour?

Sangwa's earlier exhortation states the issue with precision: lawful joy becomes poison when enthroned (Sangwa, 2026b). A throne is not defined by the beauty of what sits upon it but by its claim to command. Bread on the table nourishes. Bread on the throne becomes an idol.

Desire Is Not a Command

Modern culture often treats the persistence of a desire as evidence of its truth. "I have felt this for years" becomes "This defines me." "This relieves my pain" becomes "This is good." "I cannot imagine life without it" becomes "I am entitled to it." Yet persistence may reveal many things: a good vocation, a wound, a habit, a temptation, a fear, an addiction, an unmet need, or a disordered love. Duration does not determine moral authority.

James describes temptation as desire drawing and enticing the person before conceiving sin ([James 1:13-15](#)). The presence of desire is not identical to consent, and temptation is not identical to conduct. This distinction protects both holiness and compassion. A person may experience unwanted desire without choosing it. He should not be treated as guilty merely for being tempted. At the same time, desire is not made righteous by intensity. The Christian does not ask only, "What do I feel?" but "What is this feeling asking me to worship, believe, and do?"

Augustine's language of ordered love remains helpful. Sin is not only loving obviously evil things. It is loving created goods in the wrong order, by the wrong measure, or toward the wrong end. Food is good. Gluttony disorders it. Rest is good. Sloth disorders it. Marital intimacy is good. Lust detaches it from covenant and holiness. Recognition may encourage service. Pride makes recognition the reason to serve. Money may provide and bless. Greed turns provision into identity and security.

Wanting Without Liking

Popular descriptions of the "dopamine hit" often overstate what neuroscience has established. Dopamine is not simply a pleasure chemical, and no serious account should reduce complex behaviour to one molecule. Research distinguishes aspects of reward, learning, salience, motivation, and experienced pleasure. Berridge and Robinson (2016) argue that cue-triggered "wanting" can become amplified without a corresponding increase in "liking." This distinction illuminates a familiar moral experience: the person reaches again for what no longer gives much joy.

Such findings do not prove a complete biblical anthropology, and they should not be used to declare every strong habit an addiction. Kardefelt-Winther et al. (2017) caution against pathologising common behaviours and propose that significant impairment or distress and persistence over time are important criteria when speaking of behavioural addiction. The World Health Organization likewise notes that gaming disorder affects only a small proportion of people who game, defining disorder through impaired control, increasing priority, and continuation despite harmful consequences (World Health Organization, 2020).

Theological language and clinical language answer related but non-identical questions. Scripture may call a practice idolatrous before it meets diagnostic criteria, because it concerns worship and obedience. Clinical classification asks whether a disorder is present. Pastoral care should not confuse the two, but neither should it force them apart. A person may need repentance, practical accountability, treatment, or all three.

Social Reward and the Engineered Feed

Lindström et al. (2021) analysed more than one million social-media posts from over 4,000 users and conducted an experiment with 176 participants. Their findings were consistent with a reward-learning account in which social responses influenced posting behaviour. This does not establish that every platform user is addicted, nor does it prove that a “like” directly causes a particular mental-health outcome. It does demonstrate that online engagement can be shaped by learned responses to social reward.

The moral significance lies in repetition and design. A person posts, waits, receives approval, compares, edits, and posts again. The reward is social rather than merely sensory. The self is trained to look outward for confirmation of inward worth. The platform becomes a hall of mirrors in which each person appears to be expressing individuality while responding to metrics designed by others.

Evidence linking social media to mental health is complex. Fassi et al. (2024), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of 143 studies, found that relatively few studies focused on clinical adolescent populations and that associations varied according to sample and measure. Much of the evidence is observational. Responsible writing must therefore reject both corporate innocence and technological panic. Social media can sustain friendships, education, activism, ministry, and support. It can also intensify comparison, harassment, sleep disruption, exposure to harmful content, and compulsive checking. The effect depends upon person, content, context, design, and pattern of use.

The Christian question is wider than diagnosis: What is this environment training me to love? If a feed trains the eye toward envy, lust, outrage, mockery, self-display, or endless novelty, the user cannot appeal to neutrality. The eye remains a lamp of the body ([Matthew 6:22-23](#)), and attention is a form of stewardship.

Sexual Pleasure and the Fragmented Person

Sexual pleasure is among the strongest gifts and temptations of embodied life. Scripture places it within the covenant of marriage, where bodily union bears meanings of exclusivity, fidelity, openness to family, and mutual self-giving.

Hedonism separates sensation from covenant, body from promise, and desire from holiness.

Pornography intensifies this fragmentation. It converts persons into consumable images, trains desire toward novelty, and permits pleasure without covenant, responsibility, or the vulnerability of mutual love. Promiscuity promises freedom from constraint while often multiplying betrayal, comparison, disease risk, abandonment, and spiritual numbness. Yet this chapter does not repeat the specialised analysis reserved for Chapter 9. The present point is anthropological: when the self treats sexual desire as sovereign, another person's body becomes material for the self's project.

Conservative hypocrisy must be rebuked here. A church that condemns public sexual movements while tolerating private pornography, clerical adultery, exploitative courtship, domestic coercion, or the sexual shaming of victims has not defended holiness. It has protected reputation. The same Lord judges visible rebellion and respectable secrecy.

Food, Intoxication, and the Refusal of Limits

Food is gift, fellowship, provision, and celebration. Scripture includes feasts and warns against gluttony. The problem is not taste but mastery. Emotional eating may arise from stress, grief, deprivation, habit, or disordered appetite. Compassion requires attention to causes, health, access, and context. Moral seriousness requires refusing the claim that all restraint is body hatred.

Alcohol likewise illustrates the difference between gift and ruler. Christian traditions differ about abstinence and moderate use, but Scripture uniformly condemns drunkenness and loss of self-control ([Ephesians 5:18](#)). The World Health Organization estimates, using 2019 data, that hundreds of millions of people live with alcohol-use disorders globally (World Health Organization, 2024a). The statistic describes a public-health burden, not a license to treat every drinker as dependent. It does, however, expose the cost of an industry that can profit when consumption exceeds wisdom.

Intoxication offers temporary escape from pain, anxiety, memory, and responsibility. Yet what numbs a wound does not necessarily heal it. The relief can become a creditor that demands increasing payment. The church must neither mock the dependent person nor bless the substance that masters him. It should unite truth, treatment, accountability, community, and prayer.

Gambling, Betting, and Monetised Hope

Gambling is especially revealing because it converts hope, uncertainty, and financial pressure into revenue. The World Health Organization describes gambling disorder through impaired control, increasing priority, and continuation despite negative consequences. It also emphasises that harm occurs below the clinical threshold, including diversion of money from food, housing, healthcare, and education (World Health Organization, 2024b).

The 2024 *Lancet Public Health* Commission on gambling concluded that the industry is expanding rapidly through online access, mobile phones, legalisation, sports partnerships, and commercial penetration into new markets. It projected

global consumer losses approaching US\$700 billion by 2028 (Wardle et al., 2024). Projections remain estimates, but the direction of growth is clear. Betting is no longer confined to a distant casino. It can enter the classroom, bus, workplace, church foyer, or family bed through a phone.

In sub-Saharan Africa, mobile money, youthful populations, unemployment, sports culture, and aggressive marketing have created distinctive vulnerabilities. Bitanirwe and Ssewanyana's (2021) systematic review found growing concern about youth gambling in the region and highlighted financial, criminal, and mental-health risks, while also noting serious gaps in research. The evidence does not justify describing African youth as uniquely reckless. It does justify confronting an industry that can sell improbable escape to people facing real economic constraint.

Sports betting attaches speculation to belonging. The supporter no longer watches only for beauty, discipline, or fellowship. Every corner, goal, card, and substitution can become a financial trigger. The match enters the nervous system as an account balance. A young person who lacks stable income may wager because ordinary labour appears too slow and opportunity too scarce. The wager then drains the resources needed to build the very future he hoped to accelerate.

A biblical response should avoid two errors. First, it should not shame the poor while ignoring predatory design, advertising, and unequal opportunity. Second, it should not treat structural pressure as moral innocence. Exploitation and responsibility can coexist. The bettor may be targeted and still need to repent, seek help, surrender accounts, invite oversight, and rebuild habits of work and patience.

Gaming, Streaming, and the Loss of Stopping Cues

Gaming can cultivate skill, cooperation, storytelling, strategic thought, and recreation. Streaming can widen access to education, art, news, and wholesome entertainment. The danger arises through endlessness. A traditional game ended. A programme closed. A shop locked its doors. Digital environments can remove stopping cues, offer continuous updates, sell virtual status, and make every pause feel like lost progress.

The relevant tests are practical. Does gaming displace sleep, study, work, worship, bodily movement, or family care? Does the player become irritable when interrupted? Are purchases concealed? Is identity located in virtual achievement because embodied responsibility feels slower and less rewarding? Can the person stop for a week without distress or deception? The label "addiction" should be used carefully, but the command not to be mastered applies before a physician writes a diagnosis.

Binge-watching presents a similar pattern. Narrative can deepen moral imagination, but continuous viewing can become a refuge from unfinished duties and unprocessed grief. The screen keeps speaking so that the conscience never receives silence. The episode ends, but the next begins before the will has time to decide.

Tourism, Luxury, and Experience Consumption

Travel can teach humility, widen knowledge, restore tired bodies, sustain livelihoods, and reveal the beauty of creation. Hospitality is a biblical good. Tourism

becomes hedonistic when places and people are consumed as backdrops for status, when debt finances display, when local communities bear costs hidden from the visitor, or when travel becomes the only life considered worth living.

Experience consumption has become a major means of identity. The question is no longer only “What do you own?” but “Where have you been, what did you eat, and what can you display?” The person may possess fewer objects while remaining deeply consumerist, because experiences themselves function as badges. A photograph becomes proof of significance. The journey is lived twice: once in the location and again before the imagined audience.

Luxury is not defined only by an absolute price. Context matters. An item may be ordinary in one setting and ruinous in another. Scripture does not prescribe one universal standard of housing, clothing, or travel. It commands contentment, generosity, modesty, justice, and freedom from the love of money. The mature question is not “Can I afford this?” alone, but “What does this purchase reveal, whom does it affect, what duty does it displace, and can I receive or refuse it before God with a clear conscience?”

Entertainment as Formation, Escape, and Liturgy

Entertainment is often defended as harmless because it is “only entertainment.” The phrase misunderstands formation. Repeated stories train sympathy. Images normalise conduct. Humour lowers defences. Music shapes memory. Spectacle decides what deserves attention. The issue is not that every film preaches one doctrine consciously. It is that human beings become familiar with worlds they repeatedly inhabit.

Postman (1985) warned that public discourse could be trivialised when serious matters must compete as entertainment. Debord (1967/1994) described a society in which social relations are increasingly mediated by images and spectacle. These analyses emerged before the smartphone, yet their relevance has intensified. Tragedy becomes content. Political anger becomes engagement. Private humiliation becomes a clip. Worship becomes a production. A life may be destroyed while spectators debate camera angles.

Entertainment also functions as escape. Rest restores a person for vocation. Escape avoids vocation. The difference is not always visible from outside. Two people may watch the same match. One enjoys fellowship and returns gratefully to duty. The other has invested identity, money, anger, and time so deeply that family life is organised around fixtures and defeat produces rage. Two people may listen to music. One receives beauty. The other uses constant sound to prevent any encounter with grief, guilt, or God.

Sangwa’s recent critique of entertainment-centred worship asks whether congregants leave asking, “Was God pleased?” or merely, “Did I enjoy it?” (Sangwa, 2026a). The full ecclesial treatment belongs to Chapter 15, but the anthropological foundation is established here. A consumer formed by spectacle will expect the church to compete for attention. Silence feels empty. Reverence feels dull. Exposition feels long. Repentance feels negative. The congregation becomes an audience, and the pastor becomes a content provider.

A population can therefore be richly entertained and poorly prepared. It can know celebrity lives while lacking savings, debate sports transfers while neglecting children's education, memorise songs while remaining unable to pray, and follow global spectacles while local responsibilities decay. This diagnosis must not become class contempt. Poor communities deserve celebration and rest. Joy is not reserved for the affluent. The question is proportion and mastery: are scarce resources being directed toward brief spectacle while food, healthcare, housing, education, debt repayment, generosity, or productive investment remain neglected?

In some African settings, public ceremonies, fashion, devices, sports betting, celebrity culture, weddings, funerals, and travel may carry intense expectations of status. These patterns differ among countries, classes, religions, and communities. They should not be treated as an African essence. They reflect a global consumer order interacting with local obligations, inequality, urban aspiration, remittances, unemployment, mobile finance, and communal honour. The church must expose both imported manipulation and local vanity without insulting the poor or romanticising deprivation.

Consumerism and the Gospel of Planned Dissatisfaction

Buying a Self

Consumerism promises that identity can be assembled. The wardrobe communicates confidence. The vehicle communicates achievement. The home communicates taste. The phone communicates relevance. The holiday communicates freedom. The body becomes a renovation project. The career becomes a brand. Because identity is now displayed through purchasable signs, insecurity becomes economically productive.

Materialism is not identical to owning material goods. It is the assignment of central value to money, possessions, and image. Dittmar et al. (2014) synthesised 753 effect sizes from 259 independent samples and found that stronger materialistic orientation was associated, on average, with lower personal wellbeing. The analysis does not prove that a purchase causes misery or that every wealthy person is unhappy. It does undermine the simple promise that organising life around acquisition reliably produces fulfilment.

Consumer culture often survives disappointment by redefining it as insufficient consumption. The product failed because the premium version was needed. The journey disappointed because the destination was wrong. The body remains insecure because the treatment was incomplete. The wardrobe does not satisfy because the season changed. The religion of consumption contains no final sacrament, because completion would end the market.

Advertising and the Moral Use of Persuasion

Persuasion is unavoidable. A teacher persuades students to value truth. A pastor urges repentance. A business explains why its product is useful. Ethical marketing can provide accurate information, respect agency, avoid manipulation, and build trust.

The moral problem begins when persuasion deliberately cultivates fear, shame, envy, sexual desire, urgency, or false scarcity unrelated to the product's legitimate value. Children are especially vulnerable. Influencer marketing can conceal commercial relationships within the language of friendship. Personalised advertising can exploit data users do not understand. Beauty industries may profit by teaching normal bodies to appear defective. Financial products may advertise convenience while hiding cumulative cost.

Christian entrepreneurs and marketers cannot excuse manipulation by saying the customer chose. Consent shaped by deception is not morally clean. Profit does not baptise a method. A business should ask whether it would willingly explain its persuasive design to the customer, whether vulnerable users bear disproportionate risk, and whether revenue depends upon compulsive or financially destructive use.

Credit, Debt, and the Purchase of Tomorrow

Credit can serve stewardship. A responsible loan may finance education, housing, business, or productive assets. Debt can also become a mechanism through which present desire consumes future freedom. “Buy now, pay later” products illustrate the ambiguity. The United States Consumer Financial Protection Bureau reported rapid growth in these short-term instalment products and raised questions about repeated use, loan stacking, and the visibility of total unsecured debt (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2025a, 2025b). These findings arise from one national market and should not be universalised without local evidence. The underlying moral issue, however, is widely recognisable.

The friction of saving teaches delay. Instant credit removes the pause in which desire might be examined. The product arrives before the money exists, and tomorrow's work is pledged to yesterday's impulse. When several small obligations accumulate, the consumer discovers that convenience has become command.

The World Bank's Global Index 2025 documents the enormous expansion and value of digital financial services, especially through mobile phones in low- and middle-income economies. It also emphasises financial resilience and digital-safety gaps (Klapper et al., 2025). Mobile finance can support saving, payments, enterprise, remittances, and inclusion. The same infrastructure can make betting, impulsive purchasing, predatory credit, and fraud immediate. Technology magnifies the moral quality of the system and the habits of the user.

Scripture does not declare every debt sinful, but it refuses to treat debt lightly. The borrower becomes servant to the lender ([Proverbs 22:7](#)). This is not a promise that every debtor lacks faith. Illness, injustice, unemployment, disaster, school fees, and family responsibility can create unavoidable burdens. Churches should provide practical help rather than slogans. Yet debt used to perform status, sustain gambling, or purchase recurring luxuries requires repentance as well as budgeting.

Status, Ceremony, and Social Pressure

Some spending is less individual than it appears. Weddings, funerals, graduations, religious celebrations, and family events carry communal obligations. Refusal may be interpreted as dishonour. A household can therefore enter debt not because one person seeks private pleasure but because social recognition is expensive.

The biblical answer is not contempt for ceremony. Israel celebrated. Jesus attended a wedding. Communities need shared joy and mourning. The error appears when display overwhelms meaning, when the living are impoverished to impress spectators, or when love is measured by visible expenditure. A funeral should honour a person, not financially injure the family. A wedding should establish a covenant, not begin it under the weight of competitive display.

Pastors should resist becoming agents of status. They should not praise extravagance as blessing while ignoring debt, or make simple ceremonies appear spiritually inferior. The church can model beauty without vanity, generosity without performance, and celebration without bondage.

Therapeutic Salvation and the Rewriting of the Human Problem

Therapy as Care and Therapy as Creed

The word *therapy* covers diverse practices. Psychiatry studies and treats mental disorders. Psychology examines cognition, emotion, behaviour, development, and relationships. Counselling may help people process grief, recognise patterns, regulate emotion, repair communication, or recover from abuse. Medical treatment can reduce symptoms that would otherwise overwhelm daily life. Trauma-informed care seeks safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment rather than retraumatisation (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, 2026). These goods should be acknowledged without embarrassment.

Christians have sometimes harmed sufferers by forcing every problem into one spiritual explanation. A panic attack is not necessarily unbelief. Bipolar disorder is not simply lack of discipline. Psychosis is not automatically demon possession. Medication is not inherently rebellion against prayer. A pastor may be wise and still lack clinical competence. Seeking qualified help can be an act of stewardship.

Therapeutic culture becomes a creed when psychological wellbeing is treated as the supreme moral end. The person is then encouraged to interpret every duty by its emotional cost, every disagreement by its felt safety, and every moral boundary by whether it supports self-esteem. A useful discipline crosses its border and becomes an authority over anthropology, sin, relationships, church, and God.

The distinction resembles Chapter 4's treatment of science and scientism. Psychology is a field of inquiry and care. Psychologism is the reduction of the person to psychological categories and the elevation of therapeutic outcomes above every other good. The former can serve truth. The latter places the soul on a couch and asks comfort to pronounce judgment.

Explanation Is Not Justification

Trauma, family history, mental illness, poverty, discrimination, addiction, and social pressure can explain behaviour. Explanation is morally important because it shapes appropriate care, responsibility, prevention, and compassion. A person acting under severe impairment is not assessed in exactly the same way as a calculating

exploiter. Scripture itself distinguishes ignorance, weakness, coercion, and deliberate rebellion.

Explanation does not automatically justify. A wounded person can wound others. A victim can later become an oppressor. A diagnosis may reduce control without abolishing every form of agency. A childhood history may clarify anger without making cruelty righteous. To say this is not to blame victims for what was done to them. It is to refuse a second captivity in which suffering becomes destiny and moral growth becomes impossible.

The gospel addresses both what was done to us and what proceeds from us. Christ sees the violated, judges the abuser, and commands protection of the vulnerable. He also searches every heart. A person may be sinned against and sinful, innocent regarding one event and responsible regarding another. Biblical anthropology is compassionate precisely because it refuses reduction. We are neither pure villains nor pure products of circumstance. We are image-bearers, sufferers, agents, sinners, neighbours, and persons summoned to redemption.

Trauma, Safety, and the Expansion of Harm

Trauma is a clinical and pastoral reality. Severe events can disrupt memory, sleep, attention, bodily regulation, relationships, and the capacity to feel safe. Responsible communities should avoid needless exposure, coercion, humiliation, and practices that reproduce abuse. The language of trauma has given many survivors words for suffering that institutions once denied.

The term can also expand beyond clinical usefulness. Disagreement, ordinary frustration, correction, disappointment, and exposure to opposing ideas may be described as traumatic even when they do not meet clinical definitions. This expansion may arise from sincere distress rather than manipulation. Nevertheless, when every discomfort is classified as injury, maturity becomes difficult. Education requires correction. Marriage requires difficult conversation. Discipleship requires conviction. Work requires endurance. Community requires bearing with people who do not continuously affirm us.

Safety is a genuine good, but absolute emotional safety is impossible in a truthful world. A physician may deliver unwelcome news. A friend may confront addiction. A pastor may expose sin. Scripture may overturn a cherished identity. The aim should not be to maximise distress, but neither can distress become proof that the message is false.

The misuse can operate in the opposite direction. Religious leaders may dismiss legitimate reports of abuse as sensitivity, label boundaries rebellion, or use self-denial to demand silence. That is not biblical discipleship. Jesus did not command victims to protect wolves. A safe church investigates allegations, removes credible threats, reports crimes where required, respects due process, and refuses to confuse forgiveness with immediate restoration of access or office.

Guilt, Shame, Conviction, and Repentance

Therapeutic culture often treats guilt as harmful. Some guilt is false. A child may feel responsible for an adult's abuse. A victim may carry shame that belongs to the

offender. A person raised under arbitrary control may feel guilty for making a lawful decision. Such guilt should be corrected by truth.

Objective guilt is different. It is the real condition of having violated God's law. The conscience may recognise it accurately, distort it, suppress it, or become desensitised. Shame concerns the exposure of the self and may become toxic when it says, "You are nothing but what happened or what you did." Conviction by the Holy Spirit names sin truthfully while directing the sinner toward Christ. Remorse grieves consequences. Repentance turns from sin toward God. Forgiveness rests upon Christ's atonement, not upon the sinner's ability to feel worthy.

Repentance is therefore not psychological violence. It is a gracious summons out of unreality. A physician who refuses to name disease cannot heal by kindness. Likewise, a church that calls bondage freedom leaves people under the master it fears to identify. Yet repentance must not be weaponised. The rebuker stands under the same Word. Confession should not be extracted for spectacle, and spiritual authority must not invade privacy beyond biblical necessity.

Restitution may follow repentance where harm can be repaired. Reconciliation may be desirable but is not identical to forgiveness, particularly where trust was destroyed or danger remains. Boundaries can be faithful. The gospel does not require a survivor to make an unrepentant abuser comfortable.

Self-Esteem, Self-Compassion, and the Question of Worth

The self-esteem movement arose partly as a response to humiliation, failure, and the belief that low self-regard contributes to poor outcomes. Research offers a more complicated picture. Baumeister et al. (2003) found limited evidence that simply boosting self-esteem causes broad improvements in performance or behaviour, although high self-esteem may support initiative and pleasant feeling. Orth et al. (2012), using longitudinal data, found that self-esteem was associated with several life outcomes across the lifespan. These findings need not be treated as contradictory. Self-evaluation can matter, but indiscriminate praise is not a universal cure.

Self-compassion research has emphasised kindness toward oneself, recognition of common humanity, and mindful awareness rather than harsh self-condemnation (Neff, 2003). Some of these practices can correspond to biblical truths when detached from self-deification: creatures are limited, sufferers are not alone, and repentance need not involve self-hatred. Yet Christian compassion toward the self rests upon God's truth and mercy, not upon the declaration that the self is morally sufficient.

Biblical dignity is bestowed, not manufactured. Human beings bear God's image ([Genesis 1:26-27](#)). Their worth does not depend upon beauty, productivity, wealth, intelligence, applause, or subjective confidence. This foundation can protect the person from both self-loathing and self-worship. I do not need to declare myself divine in order to resist contempt. I do not need to pretend innocence in order to receive mercy.

The command to love one's neighbour "as yourself" assumes ordinary self-concern; it does not establish self-love as the supreme moral duty ([Matthew 22:37-40](#)). Paul can say that no one hates his own flesh but nourishes it, while commanding husbands to extend that ordinary care sacrificially to their wives ([Ephesians 5:28-29](#)).

The biblical movement is outward and upward: love God, serve neighbour, steward the body, and receive identity in Christ.

Self-Care and the Idol of Comfort

Self-care can mean sleep, nutrition, treatment, exercise, sabbath-like rest, recovery after strain, boundaries against abuse, and wise limits. The World Health Organization defines self-care broadly as the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness with or without support from health workers (World Health Organization, 2022). Such care is not selfishness by definition.

Self-care becomes self-worship when personal comfort automatically overrides covenant, duty, generosity, truth, or service. “Protecting my peace” can become refusal to apologise. “Setting boundaries” can become abandoning dependants. “Avoiding toxicity” can become escaping anyone who challenges pride. “Preventing burnout” can become a respectable name for laziness, while genuine burnout remains ignored in those without power to withdraw.

Sangwa's *When Ease Becomes an Idol* depicts a velvet highway where constant softness weakens the muscles required for suffering (Sangwa, 2026c). Comfort is a merciful servant but a cruel trainer. A body that never bears weight loses strength. A soul that never hears “no” loses freedom. A church trained only by convenience will not be ready for persecution.

The point is not to seek hardship theatrically. Christians should relieve avoidable suffering, treat disease, oppose abuse, create humane workplaces, and rest. Jesus invited His disciples to withdraw after labour. Paul accepted practical support. The error is to make ease the measure of God's presence. The cross then appears as divine failure rather than the centre of redemption.

The Strongest Case for Autonomy, Pleasure, and Therapy

A fair argument must hear why these movements became persuasive. Autonomy has protected people from coercive parents, abusive spouses, authoritarian pastors, discriminatory institutions, and governments that confuse obedience with silence. Self-expression has enabled neglected people to name pain. Pleasure can contribute to wellbeing, friendship, creativity, and relief from relentless labour. Consumer choice can widen access, increase quality, and restrain monopolies. Entertainment can strengthen community, imagination, and cultural memory. Counselling can help people recover from trauma. Self-care can prevent exhaustion. Boundaries can interrupt cycles of abuse.

Traditional Christianity has sometimes supplied evidence for its critics. Churches have glorified unnecessary suffering, treated poverty as holiness while leaders lived extravagantly, discouraged mental-health treatment, shamed bodies, silenced women and children, protected abusers, demanded unquestioning submission, or used the language of sacrifice to consume volunteers. Moralistic communities have condemned visible pleasure while tolerating greed, ethnic pride, domestic cruelty, gossip, and corruption. Calls to “forgive” have sometimes meant

“do not report.” Calls to “deny yourself” have sometimes meant “serve my ambition.”

These failures require confession, not public-relations defence. An authority that contradicts Scripture does not become sacred because it uses biblical vocabulary. A pastor is not lord of conscience. A husband does not own his wife. Parents do not receive permission to provoke or terrorise children. A church may not make institutional reputation more valuable than truth.

The opposing case is therefore strongest when it says: people need agency because authorities can be corrupt; people need pleasure because life contains pain; people need markets because scarcity is real; people need therapy because wounds are real; people need boundaries because access can be dangerous.

The biblical response begins by agreeing. It then asks whether the solution has become another absolute. Autonomy can resist tyranny, but autonomous desire cannot judge itself. Pleasure can refresh, but pleasure cannot define the good. Markets can distribute goods, but markets cannot determine human purpose. Therapy can relieve suffering, but therapy cannot atone for guilt or promise resurrection. Boundaries can protect, but boundaries cannot exempt a person from every costly relationship. The error is not using these goods. It is asking them to save.

A prison door can be opened only for the released person to walk into another cell. Modern autonomy often escapes oppressive external control and enters internal compulsion. The old master said, “Obey me.” The new master says, “Obey every desire that feels like you.” Both deny the freedom of holiness.

The Biblical Examination of the Sovereign Self

“Let Him Deny Himself”: [Luke 9:23-25](#)

Jesus’ command to deny oneself is often quoted without its setting. In Luke 9, Peter has confessed Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus immediately announces that the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected, killed, and raised. Discipleship is then interpreted through the Messiah’s path: “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me” ([Luke 9:23](#)).

Self-denial is not generic low self-esteem. It is allegiance to Christ over the claims of the fallen self. The cross was not a symbol of mild inconvenience. It signified shame, judgment, and death. To take it up daily is to accept that following Jesus may cost reputation, comfort, ambition, relationships, possessions, and life.

The command has been abused when leaders demand that others carry crosses created by the leaders’ sin. An abused wife is not required to endure violence so that a husband can avoid repentance. A congregant is not required to finance a pastor’s luxury as an act of self-denial. A worker is not required to accept exploitation without lawful appeal. Jesus commands each disciple to follow *Him*, not to make another human being the beneficiary of unlimited surrender.

Biblical self-denial is the dethronement of the self as lord. It says that desire, fear, comfort, image, sexuality, possessions, and approval do not possess final authority. The self surrendered to Christ is not annihilated. Jesus continues: whoever loses his

life because of Him will save it. The life that refuses the cross is lost; the life entrusted to Christ is found.

The sovereign self hears this as erasure because it assumes that freedom means self-authorship. The gospel hears it as resurrection. A seed does not become fruitful by remaining closed ([John 12:24-26](#)). Union with Christ puts the old self to death and raises the believer into new life ([Galatians 2:20](#); [Colossians 3:1-4](#)). The person becomes more truly human, not less, because humanity is restored beneath its Creator.

The Rich Fool and the Anxious Disciple: [Luke 12:13-34](#)

Luke 12 joins greed and anxiety in one teaching. A man asks Jesus to intervene in an inheritance dispute. Jesus refuses to become a tool of the man's covetous project and warns that life does not consist in possessions. The parable that follows concerns a rich man whose land produces abundantly. His problem is not productivity. The field has yielded, planning is necessary, and storage is not inherently sinful. His speech reveals the idol: "my crops," "my barns," "my grain," "my goods," and finally, "my soul."

The man speaks to his soul as though possessions can secure years, ease, food, drink, and enjoyment. God calls him a fool because the night he plans to possess is not his. Death exposes the false arithmetic. The barns may be full while the life is required.

Jesus then turns to disciples worried about food and clothing. Greed says, "I can secure myself through more." Anxiety says, "I will perish without more." Both treat provision as ultimate and forget the Father. The answer is not irresponsibility. Birds seek food; disciples still work. The answer is kingdom priority, trust, generosity, and treasure in heaven.

Consumerism lives between the rich fool and the anxious disciple. It tells the affluent to enlarge barns and the insecure to purchase proof that they will be safe. Jesus redirects both: seek the kingdom, sell possessions and give, and locate the heart where the treasure cannot decay. Stewardship is not merely a budget technique. It is a declaration that God, not accumulation, owns tomorrow.

Slavery, Wages, and Freedom: [Romans 6:12-23](#)

Romans 6 refuses the sovereign self's illusion that freedom means absence of mastery. Paul asks believers not to let sin reign in the mortal body so that they obey its desires. The language is political and bodily. Sin reigns. Desire commands. Members of the body become instruments. The person presents himself to a master.

Paul's question is not whether human beings will serve, but whom they will serve. Obedience to sin leads to death. Obedience arising from faith leads toward righteousness. Having been set free from sin, believers become enslaved to God, with holiness as fruit and eternal life as end.

Modern ears resist the language of slavery to God. Yet Paul's contrast is not between slavery and autonomous neutrality. Sin advertises freedom while paying death. God liberates from a destructive master and gives life as gift. Divine service does not erase creaturely dignity because God is not a rival tyrant. He is the Creator for whom humanity was made.

This passage illuminates compulsive pleasure. The person says, “I can stop whenever I choose,” while continuing despite consequences. He calls the habit freedom because no external authority forbids it. Paul asks who is actually being obeyed. The answer may be appetite, alcohol, pornography, approval, gambling, shopping, anger, or image. Freedom is revealed not by the absence of rules but by the ability to present the body to righteousness.

The wages and the gift are also contrasted. Sin pays what is owed: death. God gives what cannot be purchased: eternal life in Christ Jesus. Consumerism trains people to think in transactions, including religious transactions. The gospel announces grace. No purchase, therapy, journey, or act of self-expression can obtain what God gives through the crucified and risen Son.

Their God Is Their Stomach: Philippians 3:17-21

Paul warns through tears about enemies of the cross whose end is destruction, whose god is their stomach, whose glory is in their shame, and whose minds are set on earthly things. The “stomach” can represent bodily appetite more broadly than food. The defining issue is worship: appetite has become god.

Paul is not condemning embodiment. The passage concludes with bodily transformation. Christian hope is not escape from the body but the Saviour’s transformation of the humble body to conform to His glorious body. Because the body has a resurrection future, it is neither despised nor enthroned. It is stewarded.

Heavenly citizenship likewise does not justify neglect of earthly duty. Philippi understood citizenship as allegiance and identity. Believers await a Saviour from heaven while living faithfully on earth. Consumer culture tells the person to seek a glorified body now through purchase, display, enhancement, and comparison. The gospel promises glory as gift at Christ’s return and calls the present body into holiness.

The enemies of the cross may possess religious appearance. Appetite can be baptised. A preacher may call luxury favour. A congregation may call spectacle revival. A believer may call indulgence liberty. Paul’s tears are important. He does not expose error with delight. He grieves because the end is destruction.

Lovers of Pleasure Rather Than Lovers of God: 2 Timothy 3:1-5

Paul’s catalogue of the last days begins with disordered love: people will be lovers of self and lovers of money. It includes pride, ingratitude, brutality, lack of self-control, and love of pleasure rather than love of God. The sequence culminates in a form of godliness that denies its power.

This is not merely a description of secular decadence. Religious form remains. Churches, conferences, ministries, and Christian households can be organised around self-love, money, pleasure, and image while retaining prayers, songs, and titles. The danger is therefore not only that pleasure keeps people outside church. It can redesign the church from within.

“Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” does not mean every pleasure competes equally with God. The comparative word reveals priority. A believer may enjoy a meal and love God above it. He may enjoy sport and close the screen to serve

his family. She may enjoy travel and refuse debt or vanity. The test comes when obedience threatens the pleasure. Which love rules then?

The last-days warning should produce readiness, not date-setting. Scripture does not authorise us to calculate the rapture from trends. It does command watchfulness. A church trained to choose teachers according to desire will be vulnerable to deception. A body trained only for comfort will resist costly truth. The urgent task is therefore to love God more, not merely to consume more prophecy content.

Ecclesiastes and the Experiment of Pleasure

Ecclesiastes 2 presents a royal experiment. The Teacher tests pleasure, laughter, projects, houses, vineyards, servants, wealth, music, and greatness. The account does not condemn craftsmanship or beauty. It exposes their inability to bear ultimate meaning. When life is examined “under the sun,” death levels the wise and foolish, and achievement cannot secure lasting possession.

The conclusion is not nihilism. Enjoyment is received as gift from God’s hand ([Ecclesiastes 2:24–26](#)). This distinction is central. The hedonist seizes enjoyment as purpose. The believer receives enjoyment as gift. A gift directs gratitude toward the giver and remains bounded by the giver’s will. An idol directs worship toward itself and demands more.

Ecclesiastes speaks directly to a culture of bucket lists and experience accumulation. One can sample nations, cuisines, careers, relationships, and spectacles and still confront the same question in the hotel room at night: what remains when the experience ends? Novelty postpones the question. It cannot answer it.

The Desire of the Flesh, the Eyes, and the Pride of Possessions

First [John 2:15–17](#) names a triad that maps closely onto consumer culture: the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and pride in possessions. The “world” here is not creation or humanity as objects of neighbour-love. It is the moral order organised against the Father.

The flesh seeks gratification, the eyes covet what is displayed, and possessions support boastful identity. Digital platforms unite all three. The eye sees curated bodies and lifestyles. Desire awakens. Possession or experience promises status. The user then displays a version of the same life to others. A cycle of mutual temptation emerges.

John’s answer is eschatological. The world with its desire is passing away, but the one who does God’s will remains forever. Consumerism depends upon forgetting transience. Fashion must feel permanent until the next release. Celebrity must feel glorious until the next scandal. The kingdom exposes the shelf life of every idol.

The Biblical Alternative: Ordered Joy Beneath the Lordship of Christ

Holiness Is Not Hostility to Joy

The Christian answer to hedonism is not the abolition of pleasure. Ascetic systems can become another form of pride in which severe treatment of the body appears spiritually superior while the heart remains unbroken ([Colossians 2:20-23](#)). God created taste, colour, music, marital love, friendship, sleep, play, and harvest. Paul warns against teachers who forbid foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving ([1 Timothy 4:1-5](#)).

The difference lies in order. Biblical joy begins in God and receives created goods without asking them to become God. It can feast without worshipping appetite and fast without despising food. It can celebrate abundance and remain generous. It can suffer without concluding that life has lost meaning. It can relinquish a lawful pleasure when love requires sacrifice.

Holiness does not drain the colour from creation. It rescues colour from idolatry. The person who no longer needs a meal to prove status can taste it gratefully. The person who no longer needs travel to manufacture identity can receive a journey as gift. The person who no longer needs applause can serve unseen. The person whose future rests in resurrection can enjoy the present without demanding that the present become heaven.

Contentment as Freedom

Paul's statement that he can do all things through Christ is often detached from its context and turned into a promise of unlimited achievement. In [Philippians 4:10-13](#), he is speaking about learning contentment in humble circumstances and abundance, hunger and plenty. Christ strengthens him to remain faithful across changing conditions.

Contentment is not passivity before injustice. Paul used legal rights, worked, received support, confronted wrongdoing, and pursued mission. Contentment is freedom from the claim that circumstances must satisfy the soul before obedience is possible. It allows the poor believer to retain dignity without romanticising deprivation and the affluent believer to hold wealth without being held by it.

First Timothy 6:6-19 joins contentment, warning, generosity, and hope. We brought nothing into the world and can take nothing out. Those determined to be rich fall into temptation and harmful desires. The rich are not told merely to become poor; they are told not to be arrogant or to set hope on uncertain wealth, but to be rich in good works, generous, and willing to share.

This balance corrects two errors. Prosperity teaching treats wealth as proof of faith. Romantic poverty treats lack as proof of holiness. Scripture judges both by allegiance. A poor person can worship money he does not possess. A wealthy person can steward resources with humility. The decisive question is where hope rests and how possessions are used.

Stewardship, Work, and Delayed Gratification

The consumer asks, “What can I obtain?” The steward asks, “What has been entrusted to me, for whose benefit, and before whom will I answer?” Stewardship includes money, time, body, attention, skills, relationships, technology, and influence. It rejects both waste and hoarding.

Work is not merely a method of financing consumption. It is a sphere of service, cultivation, provision, creativity, and neighbour-love. The fall makes work painful, unjust, and frustrating, but work itself precedes the fall. A society that presents labour only as an obstacle between the self and leisure impoverishes vocation. A church that praises wealth while ignoring patient work invites speculation, gambling, and exploitation.

Delayed gratification is not automatically righteous, since a person may save patiently for pride. Yet the capacity to delay is morally significant. It permits planning, education, generosity, marriage, parenthood, enterprise, and endurance. Fasting trains this capacity by teaching the body that appetite can speak without commanding. The practice does not earn favour. It reminds the believer that man does not live by bread alone ([Matthew 4:4](#)).

Families should teach children to save, wait, repair, share, and distinguish needs from status. Churches should teach budgets without reducing discipleship to financial technique. Christian entrepreneurs should design products that serve rather than prey upon impatience. Governments should protect citizens from fraud and predatory systems without assuming that regulation can regenerate desire.

Attention as a Sacred Stewardship

Attention determines which voices become familiar and which desires grow. A person can lose hours in fragments too small to remember. The loss is not only time. Fragmented attention weakens prayer, reading, listening, craft, and the sustained presence required by love.

Digital discipline should therefore be concrete. Notifications can be limited. Devices can remain outside bedrooms, meals, prayer, and worship. Families can establish screen-free hours. Applications that repeatedly master the user can be removed. A believer struggling with pornography or betting may need filtering, financial controls, disclosed passwords, professional treatment, or temporary abandonment of a device.

These practices are not legalistic when they serve freedom. Jesus' language about removing what causes stumbling is severe because eternity is serious ([Matthew 5:27-30](#)). A person who repeatedly says, “I should be strong enough to keep the temptation near,” may be protecting pride rather than liberty. Wisdom does not prove strength by sleeping beside a serpent.

Silence should also be recovered. The inability to endure silence may reveal grief, fear, boredom, or guilt. Silence is not automatically holy, but it creates space in which the Word can be heard, motives examined, and prayer deepened. Entertainment often keeps the surface of the soul moving so that the depths remain unvisited.

Community Against the Curated Self

The sovereign self prefers relationships that affirm its project. The church forms another kind of people. Members belong to one body, bear burdens, confess sin, forgive, submit to lawful discipline, and serve across differences. The local church is not an audience selected by taste. It is a covenantal community gathered by Christ.

Embodied fellowship corrects digital performance. People encounter one another without filters, during illness, failure, ageing, inconvenience, and disagreement. A member cannot be reduced to content because he must be visited, fed, corrected, comforted, and endured. The church should therefore resist replacing embodied accountability with anonymous spiritual consumption.

Healthy community also protects against abusive authority. Plural qualified leadership, transparent governance, due process, safeguarding, and accountability prevent one person's preferences from becoming divine command. Biblical submission is reciprocal in its moral setting and always under Christ. The answer to autonomous isolation is not spiritual tyranny but holy communion.

Suffering and the Formation of Endurance

A culture organised around comfort becomes unable to interpret suffering except as failure. Scripture provides a richer account. Some suffering results from sin and should lead to repentance. Some results from injustice and should be opposed. Some arises from illness, bereavement, ageing, and a groaning creation. Some accompanies obedience, service, discipline, and persecution.

Christians do not seek pain for its own sake. Jesus healed, fed, comforted, and taught His disciples to pray for deliverance. Paul asked for the thorn to be removed. The church should alleviate suffering where it can. Yet the Father's refusal to remove every trial is not evidence of cruelty. Suffering can produce endurance, tested character, compassion, and hope ([Romans 5:3-5](#); [James 1:2-4](#)).

The cross is the decisive contradiction of therapeutic salvation. Jesus was not saved from suffering by self-affirmation. He entrusted Himself to the Father, bore sin, and was raised. Christian hope therefore neither glorifies pain nor makes comfort the final good. It looks through the cross toward resurrection.

Sangwa's velvet-highway image warns that a soul formed only by ease will collapse when diagnosis, betrayal, grief, persecution, or economic loss arrives (Sangwa, 2026c). Churches must prepare believers before the hill. Teaching on endurance is not pessimism. It is pastoral love.

When the Sovereign Self Enters the Church

The age does not need to remove the cross from a church building if it can turn the cross into a logo for self-improvement. The sovereign self enters through sermons centred on destiny, worship organised around emotional stimulation, and pastoral care that offers affirmation without repentance. Scripture remains present, but it is selected according to therapeutic usefulness.

Motivational preaching may use biblical truth to encourage courage, work, or hope. Encouragement is necessary. The error occurs when God becomes the sponsor

of personal ambition and the biblical story becomes a catalogue of techniques for success. David's victory becomes confidence coaching. Joseph becomes a career strategy. Esther becomes personal branding. The cross becomes evidence that the listener deserves a better life.

Consumer congregations evaluate churches as lifestyle products. They ask whether parking is convenient, music enjoyable, children entertained, networking useful, and sermons affirming. Some of these concerns are legitimate. Hospitality, safety, clarity, and competent organisation matter. The problem is that the worshipper remains customer rather than disciple. A customer is sovereign because the supplier fears losing him. A disciple is under the Word even when the Word wounds before it heals.

Pastors can become afraid to offend because attendance and revenue appear fragile. Sin is described indirectly. Discipline disappears. Suffering is treated as a public-relations problem. Sermons avoid judgment, hell, sexual holiness, greed, restitution, and self-denial. The congregation is kept comfortable and therefore left unprepared.

The opposite abuse also exists. Leaders may call every question rebellion, every boundary selfishness, and every exhaustion lack of commitment. They may preach sacrifice to others while protecting their own comfort. This is not resistance to the sovereign self. It is the leader's sovereign self demanding submission. Chapter 13 will examine such tyranny fully.

Chapter 15 will address entertainment worship and manufactured revival in detail. Here the conclusion is sufficient: a church formed by consumer anthropology will measure faithfulness by attraction, stimulation, and satisfaction. It may draw a crowd while starving the body.

Consequences of Enthroning the Self

Personal Fragmentation

The sovereign self promises coherence but produces an exhausting task. The person must invent meaning, curate identity, interpret desire, protect image, secure recognition, and heal wounds. Failure becomes existential because worth depends upon performance. The result may include anxiety, comparison, shame, resentment, compulsive consumption, and unstable identity.

Not every person experiencing these conditions is guilty of self-worship. Mental illness, poverty, trauma, disability, discrimination, and biological vulnerability matter. The argument is cultural and theological, not a diagnosis of individuals. It observes that a society demanding self-creation places a burden upon people already wounded by the fall.

The World Health Organization's 2025 Commission on Social Connection reported that loneliness affects about one in six people worldwide and carries serious health and social consequences (World Health Organization, 2025). Loneliness cannot be attributed to consumerism or digital media alone. Urbanisation, migration, family disruption, illness, ageing, poverty, and many other factors

contribute. Yet the coexistence of massive connectivity and widespread loneliness exposes the difference between contact and communion.

Relational Disposability

Relationships require duties that outlast immediate fulfilment. Marriage asks fidelity when emotion changes. Parenthood demands sacrifice. Friendship requires inconvenient presence. Care for the elderly slows ambition. Church membership brings obligations to people one did not choose.

When the self is sovereign, relationships remain secure only while they serve the self's project. Disagreement becomes toxicity, sacrifice becomes loss of authenticity, and forgiveness becomes optional whenever anger feels protective. People can be unfollowed, blocked, replaced, or abandoned with the logic of consumer choice.

Boundaries remain necessary. Reconciliation does not require exposure to ongoing abuse. Yet the boundary concept can be stretched until every difficult person is removed. The result is a purified social world containing fewer demands and less love. Love is not proved by endless access, but neither is maturity proved by endless exit.

Financial Fragility

Consumerism redirects income from resilience toward display and stimulation. Gambling losses, status ceremonies, impulsive credit, recurring subscriptions, luxury experiences, and device replacement can weaken households already exposed to economic shocks. Again, causes differ. Low wages and structural injustice can make saving impossible. The poor should not be lectured as though budgeting creates income.

Where choice exists, however, stewardship matters. A household that repeatedly finances spectacle while neglecting essentials is not liberated by calling the pattern cultural. A leader who encourages conspicuous consumption among indebted congregants is not blessing them. Churches should teach financial truth, create benevolent support with accountability, and honour quiet faithfulness rather than visible display.

Attention, Education, and Vocation

Fragmented attention affects reading, study, craftsmanship, prayer, and conversation. Students may confuse access to information with mastery. Workers may remain continuously interrupted. Families may share a room while inhabiting separate feeds. The result is not only reduced productivity but a diminished capacity for depth.

Chapter 18 will examine education, media, pornography, and workplace formation more fully. The present point is that attention is never merely private. A distracted student becomes an underprepared professional. A distracted driver endangers others. A distracted parent forms a child. A distracted pastor mishandles souls.

Ecclesial Weakness

A church trained by comfort has limited capacity for persecution, doctrinal conflict, sacrificial mission, or long obedience. It may flourish while cultural approval remains high and collapse when faithfulness becomes costly. Therapeutic preaching can create false assurance because listeners learn to interpret emotional relief as spiritual life.

The form of godliness remains, as [2 Timothy 3:5](#) warns, while its power is denied. The power denied is not noisy spectacle but the transforming power that produces holiness, endurance, love, self-control, repentance, and faithful witness.

Eternal Unreadiness

The gravest consequence is eternal. Pleasure can distract from death but cannot defeat it. Therapy can help a person cope but cannot justify before God. Consumption can postpone emptiness but cannot purchase resurrection. Entertainment can fill the final evening but cannot silence the trumpet.

The rich fool's barns remained standing after his soul was required. The issue was not that he enjoyed grain. It was that he prepared for years and not for eternity. A person can optimise sleep, mood, image, finances, and experiences while remaining unreconciled to God.

The church must therefore resist a gospel that prepares people to feel better but not to meet Christ.

A Differentiated Pastoral Appeal

To the Wounded

What was done to you matters. Abuse is not sanctified by religious language. God does not command you to call evil good, remain in immediate danger, conceal crimes, or grant unrepentant people unrestricted access. Seek safe help. Use competent medical and psychological care where appropriate. Receive support from trustworthy believers. Grief is not rebellion, and boundaries are not automatically bitterness.

Yet do not allow the wound to become your final name. You are not merely what another person did. Christ sees, judges, restores dignity, and calls you into a future not governed by the offender. Healing may be slow. Forgiveness does not erase justice. The gospel does not rush pain, but it refuses to let pain become lord.

To Those Experiencing Addiction or Compulsion

Bondage should be named without contempt. You may have promised yourself many times that this was the last bet, last drink, last purchase, last image, or last night lost to a screen. Shame often drives secrecy, and secrecy protects the master.

Bring the practice into truth. Confess to God and to trustworthy people. Remove access. Surrender financial controls where needed. Seek clinical assessment and treatment where appropriate. Join accountable community. Repair harm patiently. Relapse should not be treated casually, but neither should it be interpreted as proof

that grace has failed. Christ's mercy is not permission to remain enslaved. It is power to rise and continue in the light.

To the Poor and Financially Vulnerable

Your poverty is not proof of spiritual failure. The church must not shame you for lacking what unjust systems, illness, unemployment, or family burdens have made difficult. God hears the oppressed and condemns exploitation.

Beware, however, of markets that sell instant escape. Betting companies, predatory lenders, false prophets, and status industries may study desperation and convert it into income. An improbable jackpot is not a development plan. Seek patient work, training, trustworthy counsel, cooperative support, saving where possible, and lawful opportunity. Let the church stand beside you materially, not merely advise you from a distance.

To the Affluent

Abundance is a test, not proof of divine approval. Your ability to purchase does not settle whether a purchase is wise. Luxury can numb awareness of the poor, turn servants into scenery, and teach children that value is visible.

Hold wealth with open hands. Make accounts transparent where stewardship requires it. Pay workers justly. Give without performance. Refuse the need to display every blessing. Invest in people, institutions, education, health, mission, and durable good. Remember that the rich fool was not condemned for a productive harvest but for a soul organised around possession.

To Young People

The screen will offer you a thousand identities before you have learned your own responsibilities. Influencers may present edited outcomes without cost. Betting will promise income without vocation. Pornography will promise intimacy without covenant. Fashion and beauty systems will teach you to audit your body through other people's eyes.

You do not need to despise yourself in order to resist these demands. Your body is created. Your worth is received. Your gifts should be cultivated, but you are not a brand awaiting market approval. Learn to work when no one applauds, pray when nothing feels dramatic, read beyond the caption, save before spending, and choose friends who can tell you the truth.

To Parents

Children learn consumption before they understand money. They watch how adults speak about brands, bodies, houses, ceremonies, and success. Do not purchase affection or compensate for absence with devices. Teach gratitude, waiting, repair, generosity, chores, hospitality, and wise celebration.

Protect children from digital exposure without pretending that prohibition alone forms virtue. Explain advertising, pornography, gambling, influencer marketing, and the business of attention. Model device boundaries. Listen when children report harm. Correct without humiliation. Let the home become a place where worth is not measured by performance or possession.

To Pastors and Christian Leaders

Do not use therapeutic language to conceal the gospel's offence. Preach sin, judgment, atonement, repentance, holiness, and Christ's return. Do so with tears, patience, and doctrinal care. Do not turn every sermon into a promise that listeners will feel better by the closing song.

Do not misuse self-denial to protect your power. A servant does not demand sacrifices he refuses to make. Be accountable. Refer people to qualified clinicians when needs exceed pastoral competence. Protect victims. Investigate allegations. Make financial and governance systems transparent. Teach joy without spectacle and discipline without cruelty.

To Psychologists, Counsellors, and Physicians

Your work can be a profound service to neighbours. Continue to distinguish evidence from fashion, diagnosis from identity, explanation from moral absolution, and care from ideological affirmation. Recognise the limits of each discipline. A scan, scale, or therapeutic model does not exhaust the human person.

Respect patients' spiritual convictions. Collaborate appropriately with pastoral care while protecting clinical boundaries. Do not treat every religious belief as pathology, and do not allow religious communities to use you as a substitute for repentance or safeguarding.

To Christian Entrepreneurs, Marketers, Educators, and Media Producers

Do not manufacture insecurity in order to sell relief. Do not design for compulsion and call the result engagement. Do not hide risk in fine print while celebrating consent. Do not target children, the indebted, the lonely, or the desperate with methods that exploit vulnerability.

A Christian enterprise must ask not only whether a product is legal or profitable but what habits it cultivates, what people it harms, and whether it can be offered before Christ with truth. Innovation is not exempt from discipleship.

To the Repentant

No appetite, debt, history, shame, or false identity places you beyond Christ's reach. The gospel does not say that you must first repair yourself and then approach. It says that the crucified and risen Lord receives sinners who turn to Him in faith.

Repentance may have consequences. Money may need to be repaid. Devices may need to be surrendered. Relationships may require truth. A platform may need to be abandoned. Recovery may require treatment and years of patient rebuilding. Grace is free, but it does not preserve the throne from which it rescues you.

The Last Second Before Midnight

Scripture's description of the last days includes lovers of self, lovers of money, people without self-control, and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God ([2 Timothy 3:1-5](#)). We should not manipulate this passage into a calendar. Wars, technologies,

trends, and moral decline do not authorise speculative dates. The Lord commands readiness in every generation.

Yet readiness cannot be separated from the actual loves shaping the church. A bride distracted by mirrors, purchases, screens, applause, and comfort may still speak about the Bridegroom while neglecting oil. Prophecy content can itself become entertainment, producing excitement without holiness. The question is not how many signs a person can list. It is whether he is awake, obedient, reconciled, truthful, and waiting.

We are living as though the hand has reached the final second before midnight. This language should not produce panic. It should produce sobriety. There is no time to protect an addiction because it is private. No time to build identity on a platform that will pass. No time to remain in a church that offers affirmation without the gospel. No time to call greed blessing, comfort peace, or self-worship dignity.

Entertainment cannot silence the trumpet. Consumption cannot purchase eternal life. Therapy cannot remove divine judgment. Pleasure cannot conquer death. The sovereign self cannot save itself.

Examine the heart. Renounce the idol. Confess what has mastered you. Seek help. Restore neglected duties. Reorder finances. Reconcile where truth permits. Protect those in danger. Practise self-control. Fast. Give. Work faithfully. Return to Scripture, prayer, and embodied fellowship. Keep the lamp burning.

The Crown the Self Cannot Carry

The sovereign self begins with a promise of liberation and ends beneath an impossible burden. It must create worth without a Creator, innocence without atonement, identity without a stable nature, communion without obligation, healing without truth, and immortality without resurrection. No person can carry this crown. It cuts into the head it appears to honour.

The biblical answer does not crush human dignity. It explains it. You matter because God made you, not because you have successfully persuaded an audience. Your body matters because it belongs to the Lord, not because it meets a market standard. Your guilt can be forgiven because Christ bore sin, not because guilt was renamed. Your wounds can be tended without declaring every desire righteous. Your future can be secure because Christ rose bodily and will transform His people.

Pleasure returns to its rightful place as gift. Consumption returns to stewardship. Therapy returns to care. Rest returns to preparation for service. The self returns from the throne to the feet of Christ, where it discovers that surrender to the rightful Lord is not annihilation but life.

The church must therefore correct with clarity, rebuke exploitation and wilful indulgence, exhort the weary toward endurance, and restore the repentant gently. It must resist the cruel simplicity of both the libertine and the tyrant. The libertine says every desire deserves obedience. The tyrant says every human authority deserves obedience. Scripture places desire and authority alike beneath Christ.

The sovereign self does not remain content with redefining fulfilment. A God who commands repentance, limits desire, judges sin, and claims absolute worship remains an intolerable threat to autonomy. Humanity does not always abandon

God. It often performs a subtler act. It remakes Him as an affirming therapist, a provider of comfort, a spiritual energy, a national mascot, or a servant of personal destiny. Chapter 6 therefore turns from the enthroned self to the deity it constructs: a god remade in humanity's image.

References

- Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4(1), 1-44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1529-1006.01431>
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. University of California Press.
- Bentham, J. (2007). *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*. Dover Publications. (Original work published 1789)
- Bernays, E. L. (1928). *Propaganda*. Horace Liveright.
- Berridge, K. C., & Robinson, T. E. (2016). Liking, wanting, and the incentive-sensitization theory of addiction. *American Psychologist*, 71(8), 670-679. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000059>
- Bitanirwhe, B. K. Y., & Ssewanyana, D. (2021). Gambling patterns and problem gambling among youth in sub-Saharan Africa: A systematic review. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 37, 723-745. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-021-10001-w>
- Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. (2025a). *Consumer use of buy now, pay later and other unsecured debt*. <https://www.consumerfinance.gov/data-research/research-reports/consumer-use-of-buy-now-pay-later-and-other-unsecured-debt/>
- Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. (2025b). *The buy now, pay later market*. <https://www.consumerfinance.gov/data-research/research-reports/the-buy-now-pay-later-market/>
- Debord, G. (1994). *The society of the spectacle* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Zone Books. (Original work published 1967)
- Dittmar, H., Bond, R., Hurst, M., & Kasser, T. (2014). The relationship between materialism and personal well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 107(5), 879-924. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037409>
- Epicurus. (1994). *The Epicurus reader: Selected writings and testimonia* (B. Inwood & L. P. Gerson, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
- Fassi, L., Thomas, K., Parry, D. A., Leyland-Craggs, A., Ford, T. J., & Orben, A. (2024). Social media use and internalizing symptoms in clinical and community adolescent samples: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 178(8), 814-822. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2024.2078>
- International Telecommunication Union. (2025). *Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2025*. <https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/facts-figures-2025/>
- Kardefelt-Winther, D., Heeren, A., Schimmenti, A., van Rooij, A., Maurage, P., Carras, M., Edman, J., Blaszczynski, A., Khazaal, Y., & Billieux, J. (2017). How can we conceptualize behavioural addiction without pathologizing common behaviours? *Addiction*, 112(10), 1709-1715. <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13763>
- Klapper, L., Singer, D., Starita, L., & Norris, A. (2025). *The Global Findex Database 2025: Connectivity and financial inclusion in the digital economy*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-2204-9>
- Lasch, C. (1979). *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. W. W. Norton.

- Lindström, B., Bellander, M., Schultner, D. T., Chang, A., Tobler, P. N., & Amodio, D. M. (2021). A computational reward learning account of social media engagement. *Nature Communications*, 12, Article 1311. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-19607-x>
- MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (3rd ed.). University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mill, J. S. (2001). *Utilitarianism* (2nd ed.). Hackett Publishing. (Original work published 1863)
- Neff, K. D. (2003). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2(3), 223-250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860309027>
- Orth, U., Robins, R. W., & Widaman, K. F. (2012). Life-span development of self-esteem and its effects on important life outcomes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(6), 1271-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025558>
- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. Viking.
- Rieff, P. (1966). *The triumph of the therapeutic: Uses of faith after Freud*. Harper & Row.
- Sangwa, S. (2025). A drug beyond cannabis: Smartphones, social media, and the quiet paganism of our age. *Open Christian Education Blog*. <https://learn.openchristian.education/blog/sangwa/smartphones-and-social-media-as-new-age-gods>
- Sangwa, S. (2026a). Could the church be turning worship into entertainment while calling it praise? *Open Christian Education Blog*. <https://learn.openchristian.education/blog/sangwa/could-the-church-be-turning-worship-into-entertainment-while-calling-it-praise>
- Sangwa, S. (2026b). Is hedonism undermining the soul of true fulfilment? *Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.0082>
- Sangwa, S. (2026c). When ease becomes an idol: A watchman's exhortation on the modern quest for the easy life. *Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.65655/OCP.0078>
- Sangwa, S. (2026d). When the mirror becomes a throne: The modern gospel of self and the ancient sin of self-exaltation. *Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.2026.0086>
- Sangwa, S. (2026e). When the serpent learns to whisper wellness: New Age, the Age of Aquarius, and the slow war on the gospel. *Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.65655/ocp.2026.0087>
- Smith, C., & Denton, M. L. (2005). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. Oxford University Press.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services* (Treatment Improvement Protocol 57, HHS Publication No. SMA 14-4816). <https://library.samhsa.gov/product/tip-57-trauma-informed-care-behavioral-health-services/sma14-4816>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2026). *Trauma-informed approaches and programs*. <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/trauma-informed-approaches-programs>
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1991). *The ethics of authenticity*. Harvard University Press.
- Trueman, C. R. (2020). *The rise and triumph of the modern self: Cultural amnesia, expressive individualism, and the road to sexual revolution*. Crossway.
- Veblen, T. (2007). *The theory of the leisure class*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1899)
- Wardle, H., Degenhardt, L., Marionneau, V., Reith, G., Livingstone, C., Sparrow, M., Tran, L. T., Biggar, B., Bunn, C., Farrell, M., Kesaite, V., Poznyak, V., Quan, J., Rehm, J., Rintoul, A., Sharma, M., Shiffman, J., Siste, K., Ukhova, D., Volberg, R., Yendork, J. S., & Saxena, S.

- (2024). The Lancet Public Health Commission on gambling. *The Lancet Public Health*, 9(11), e950–e994. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(24\)00167-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(24)00167-1)
- World Health Organization. (2020). *Addictive behaviours: Gaming disorder*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/addictive-behaviours-gaming-disorder>
- World Health Organization. (2022). *WHO guideline on self-care interventions for health and well-being, 2022 revision*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240052192>
- World Health Organization. (2024a). *Alcohol*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/alcohol>
- World Health Organization. (2024b). *Gambling*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/gambling>
- World Health Organization. (2025). *From loneliness to social connection: Charting a path to healthier societies*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240112360>