

## **It's the idolatry, stupid!**

By Ed Fowler

When attendance slipped one year at a Christian school, the board of trustees asked the headmaster for an explanation. "Variety of things," he reported. "One family said they couldn't afford the tuition any more. It was all they could do to scrape together the payment for their second big-screen TV."

We all make choices. When we do, they belong to us. But do we own them?

The family that couldn't afford tuition is part of the American middle class that is being squeezed so hard these days. In other words, they are victims. Presidential candidates pour out torrents of concern for these people, who constitute most of the electorate. The candidates assure these downtrodden voters that they have the solution for their economic woes. Apparently because they would sound foolish even to themselves to promise an ever-expanding economy that never contracts, they usually propose a redistribution scheme.

But those have problems. The New York Times reported: "To help pay for their coverage plans, Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama both say they would roll back the 'Bush tax cuts' for the wealthiest Americans. But major provisions of the tax cuts, adopted in 2001 and 2003, are already scheduled to expire at the end of 2010. Democratic lawmakers, moreover, have committed the savings from the elapsed tax cuts several times to other pet programs, like eliminating the alternative minimum tax."

Because a large element of the middle class has increasing anxiety over health care, pledges to expand coverage are especially popular. But again, there are problems. The Times also reported: "Public opinion polls show broad support for federal action to cover the uninsured. But Robert D. Reischauer, a health policy expert and president of the Urban Institute, said, 'It will be difficult for Senator Clinton and Senator Obama to retain popular support for their plans once the details are specified.'"

We of the middle class appear in peril of losing what we are entitled to. The problem, however, may not be a factor of rising costs as much as rising expectations. When I was a boy, my family lived in a house without air conditioning in a subtropical climate. We thought we were part of the middle class. People who live at the same level today are deprived. The floor of the middle class has been raised to such a level that the Washington Post reported, "Few economists dispute that typical Americans have improved their standard of living in recent decades."

So what's the problem? "Some analysts liken the plight of the middle class to an increasingly perilous high-wire act guarded by a steadily shrinking safety net: Americans pay for a steadily improving lifestyle by sending more family members to work and by juggling more debt. The savings rate, which topped 11 percent in the early 1970s, plunged below zero in 2005 as more people turned to credit cards

and home equity loans to pay their way.” The report goes on to say that many items once considered luxuries are now deemed necessary, houses are bigger and people buy far more clothes.

James Carville, advising Bill Clinton in his first run for president, coined the phrase, “The economy, stupid!” to focus the campaign on what mattered most to most voters. Sixteen years later, he could trot out the same line again. If we were all honest, however, we might concede that it’s the idolatry, stupid! From fast food to golf clubs to toenail polish, self-worshipping Americans spend with a frenzy that would make a drunken sailor look restrained. Americans of the abused middle class board their animals in “pet resorts.” No doubt we will soon hear, “Now eat your filet mignon, Tabby. There are children starving in India.”

Amid this orgy of consumerism, the aspiring president need not ponder long to decide where to pander. As long as our appetites expand unchecked we will never be satisfied and more things will be required to sustain existence at a moderate, or middle-class, level. Every four years, millions of Alices head to the polls of Wonderland, the anti-Camelot, intent on electing a candidate who has declared, “Ask not what you can do for your country. Ask what your country can do for you.”

The culture insists that we “deserve” whatever it has to sell. Judging by the frequency with which this message is delivered, it must be received well. Christians appear as susceptible to it as others.

Scripture presents a contrary view. In the Bible, God is the one who deserves. He is due all honor, glory and praise. All worship is eucharistic, an expression of thanksgiving. The only thing man deserves is death, the wages of sin. He should then be grateful for life, both physical and eternal, and all the blessings of it. What he deserves is the last thing he wants.

With an attitude of entitlement comes the conviction of deprivation. Joseph did not suffer from this malady. His brothers sold him into slavery. His master’s wife accused him unjustly, resulting in his imprisonment. He responded by making himself an instrument of God’s good in the very circumstances men intended for evil. Seeking God’s purpose and not his own, he gave thanks for all he had and put it at God’s disposal.

His idea of redistribution was to provide generously for those who had abused him. And still, somehow, he was not a victim.