

Michele A. Gonzalez. *Shopping: Christian Explorations of Daily Living*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. 128 pages. \$15.

James H. Evans Jr. *Playing: Christian Explorations of Daily Living*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. 128 pages. \$15.

A recent panel of publishing house representatives offered their opinion that, given the current milieu, books that will be published need to be simple (although not simplistic), direct, and concise. Ministry has gotten complex, time-consuming, and the demands ever more crushing, all of which limits time for languid walks through deep, sophisticated theological treatises. This may eventually prove to have profound and negative implications for preaching, which could become shallow, populist, feel-good reinforcement of the status quo. More and more preachers enter the task of preaching without the benefit of a seminary education, without the benefit of homiletics formation. Some observers of theological education speculate that the M.Div. degree may soon be a thing of the past, at least in certain neighborhoods of Christian practice. If this is indeed the case, the following two books would seem to fill the bill. Although short, they remind us to look at the mundane practices of life as having theological freight. The two books under consideration here, part of a developing Fortress Compass series entitled “Christian Explorations of Daily Living,” are *Shopping* by Michelle Gonzalez and *Playing* by James H. Evans Jr.

First, *Shopping*. “Consumerism is an ideology. It promotes a value system that is staunchly against the core of Christian values.” (13) *Shopping* would seem to be an easy target, but the endemic practice of “retail therapy” says a lot about us, about what we long for, and about what we are lacking in the way of spiritual sustenance, as well as the extensive and expensive lengths we will go to satiate that hunger. Certainly there are economic issues related to shopping, as well as cultural issues. Gonzalez examines those. But what are the theological issues? The author employs Catholic social teaching for theological grounding. She also examines several New Testament texts that frame a potential re-visioning of shopping and consumerism. Preaching on or against shopping can risk appearing to be a petty rant, if not downright un-American. It might also mean looking seriously at our own consumerist tendencies.

I recently heard a preacher mention shopping in a sermon, claiming along the way that she was not rich in the sight of the world. But alas, this preacher certainly *was* rich in the sight of the world by virtue of having a job that paid for food, health care, housing, etc. We too easily rationalize our place on the wealth scale. Shopping is so embedded in our way of life that the preacher is likely to step on a whole bunch of tender toes (including ones own) by preaching against shopping and consumerism, especially since the culture at large, not to mention the government, is urging us to spend, spend, spend in order to keep the GNP lumbering along in these times of enduring recession. The WWI era helped solve the problem of mass production. WWII and post-war efforts helped solve the problem of mass distribution. The dilemma then became how to get people to buy all this stuff: make consumers dissatisfied with what they have was the basic strategy. And boy, did it work. (Read Packard’s still relevant *The Hidden Persuaders*). Ever more sophisticated ad campaigns drive home the improved, the novel, the chic, the stylish, etc. Image is everything; at least that’s how it appears. Gonzalez reminds the reader of the false and fleeting satisfaction of shopping, doing so in light of Scripture and Catholic social teaching. There is probably little that is startlingly new here, but it is a good reminder of where we may have strayed off the path and compromised the values we proclaim

from the pulpit. She avoids being anti-culture but urges the reader to re-examine priorities and decisions along with the implications that arise from them. It is up to the preacher to determine where and how to employ all this in preaching.

The second book in the series is *Playing* by James H. Evans Jr. Although he explores a wide range of research and refers to various definitions of play, his operative definition is “*Play is a set of activities or practices that occurs in the interstices between freedom and structure, between the subject(ive) and object(ive) between creation and imitation.*” (11) Freedom is one of its essential features. Secondly, it has “both a subjective and objective dimension.” (11) Finally, it has both a creative and imitative dimension.” (12) This is a definition with a wide embrace.

While Evans has done a great deal of research on play from a variety of disciplines, it seems his core interest is the role of play in the history of African-Americans, especially during slavery. Borrowing a phrase from a Toni Morrison work, he labels this “play in the dark.” I think this would have been a more intriguing and multivalent title. “Playing in the dark is not an act of despair or hopelessness. It is the process through which divine self-revelation takes place.” (36) More than just passing time, play became a mode of survival performed under the unseeing eyes of the slave owners and in the time between sundown and sunup. The book both moves to and out from play in the life of African American slaves.

Given the limited scope of the books in this series, I wonder if this could well have been more obviously the topic of the book, limiting the lead-in material and then drawing more directly from it for application. I wanted to hear more about this. The discussion on Jesus as “player” was unexpected but interesting. Evans suggests that play, for Jesus, is “calculation, contrivance, and the subordination of the rules.” (46) I wonder how this compares to Jesus’ discussions about the law and how he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Did Jesus come to fulfill games, too? Maybe so. Evans then moves to what it means for Christians to play. He claims that “Religion is the restoration of the freedom to play.” (72) Working from Moltmann’s *Theology of Play*, Evans concludes that the “end of all things, then, is a state of being without purpose, freed from necessity, and free for wonder, awe, and adoration. The end of all things, then, is characterized by play.” (82) “Heaven is a place where the games have ended but the play goes on.” (83) Clearly for Evans, play is serious business, and we would do well to pay attention. The topic deserves more extensive treatment than this little book realistically allows. There were a great many insights and references that, in my reading, begged for further discussion or exploration than space permitted.

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