

Shopocalypse now: 'What would Jesus buy?'

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 11, 2007](#) issue

"If you want to know the power of the demonic," Stanley Hauerwas once said, "try not being a consumer." The Church of Stop Shopping has taken on the demonic forces, and its Shopocalypse tour has been captured on film in *What Would Jesus Buy?* directed by Rob VanAlkemade and produced by Morgan Spurlock (creator of *Super Size Me*).

Comedy is often better at promoting introspection than are stern lectures or a recital of facts. And Reverend Billy, otherwise known as Bill Talen, head of an odd-looking but gorgeous-sounding choir, is hilarious. His poorly dyed blond hair is blown and sprayed back in a mighty bowl. He wears a cheap white suit and a clergy collar. He invites consumers to a booth where you can "confess your shopping sins" and be absolved. He "baptizes" a child in a parking lot, asking that the child be delivered from the demons of consumerism. He has the gestures, breathing and pacing of a street evangelist down pat, and knows exactly how to fall when he's slain in the spirit.

"Mickey Mouse is the Antichrist!" he screams inside a Disney Store. "We have come to shut down Target!" he tells a security guard outside a Target store.

Talen was living in the Times Square area and watched as it transmogrified into a shopping paradise. Small shops closed and behemoths of retail business moved in. "And the only ones raising their voice," he says, "were the street preachers." He gathered some followers who would help proclaim a message of repentance: if we change our ways, we just might avert the shopocalypse.

Talen has been banned by court order from all Starbucks in California, apparently for antics like the ones displayed in the film: he leaps over a counter, drinks from the cream dispenser and spews out the contents.

The biggest delight of *What Would Jesus Buy?* is watching hapless cops try to stop the church's disruption of businesses. "Stop shopping!" Billy screams as he is led away in handcuffs. "Have you come to arrest Wal-Mart?" he asks the police in Bentonville, Arkansas, Wal-Mart's corporate home. "If you step outside the big box's prescribed behavior just a little, expressing your First Amendment rights," he warns, "they'll arrest you."

At the Mall of the Americas in Bloomington, Minnesota, so big it has its own police station, Billy and his 35-odd-member choir actually manage to don their robes and perform one of their skits on the evils of consumerism for several minutes before the cops arrive.

An irony of this zany film is that it's hard to find anyone who thinks we shop too little. *What Would Jesus Buy?* interviews dozens of people who lament consumerism but feel powerless to resist it. Though a few wealthy shoppers on Chicago's Magnificent Mile look aghast as the church tries to exorcise the Disney Store, and one Starbucks patron cusses at the protesters (he *wanted* that cream), for the most part people are entertained, not outraged. But don't ask them to change their behavior.

The film turns serious when Billy enters a locally owned clothing store in Des Moines and manages to find, marvel of marvels, a sweater made in the U.S. The store-owner is asked about the effect of the two Wal-Mart stores that opened 20 minutes in each direction from him. They've killed his business. He's advised his sons to go into another line of work. Wal-Mart has driven Main Street into the ground. "We used to have people out here and be busy till 9, 10 at night on Saturdays," the owner laments.

The filmmakers ask a few teenagers where their clothes come from, and they in turn ask the storekeepers, who defer the question. When told their clothes might have been made by a teenager working 19-hour shifts in Bangladesh for 17 cents per hour, the surly, cynical teens become earnestly angry.

A union leader describes just what that kind of money means in Bangladesh: "They can't buy toothbrushes. They brush their teeth with ashes from the fire on their fingers. This while working for a corporation that did \$11 billion in profits last year." What if people knew that? Would they buy those products? Would they begin to care where products come from?

The church members sneak into Disneyland on Christmas Day and don their robes, and Billy preaches away: “Our main streets are empty! Everything is outsourced! It’s all made in China! Take the magic back, America!” he declaims before being led away.

The Church of Stop Shopping has fairly modest goals: it wants people to shop in ways that support the local economy; it wants businesses to be good for workers and not just for corporate shareholders; it wants just treatment of workers around the world.

What if Christians were to get serious about resisting consumerism at this time of year, as Bill McKibben and Jim Wallis—who are interviewed in the film—suggest? What if we vowed to spend *nothing* on gifts this Christmas and only exchanged things we make for one another from materials already on hand? That’d be a real reason to shout “Changeluya!”