

No More Schlock

By Jamie Buckingham

The old German *schlockmeister* had a stall in a back alley where he sold cheap, shoddy merchandise. Today *schlock* has become the byword for anything trashy.

In recent years the *schlockmeister* has started selling Christian merchandise. It started innocently with things like dove license tags. In fact, I still have mine on the front of my car.

Then things quickly got out of hand. Like the bumper stickers that said "Honk if you love Jesus" or "In case of rapture this car will self-destruct."

Expanding their trade, trash merchants joined the Christian Booksellers Association and set up booths at the annual conventions. Bookstore owners, seeing a way to stock low-ticket inventory that moved rapidly, began filling their shelves with Holy Hardware, known in the trade as Jesus Junk:

Luminous light switches that glowed in the dark with the message "Jesus is the light of the world."

Scented "stick-ups" for the bathroom that said "Jesus perfumes my life."

"Junkies for Jesus" T-shirts.

"Hallelujah" rump patches for jeans.

The Christian marketplace began to take on the appearance of the outer court of the temple where merchants sold doves and lambs for sacrifice. It was there, you remember, that Jesus took a whip and, eyes blazing, drove the money changers from the temple. "You've taken a house of prayer and turned it into a den of thieves," he shouted.

During the Dark Ages, religious *schlockmeisters* sold relics and indulgences. Today they use direct mail and promise you a miracle if you send them money in return for some cheap gimmick.

Pictures of "Jesus" are plastered on everything from watches to T-shirts.



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He's not only upstaged by Mickey Mouse, He's become the pawn of Christian hucksters that have substituted for the verse about "casting pearls before swine" the words of Phineas T. Barnum: "There's a sucker born every minute."

Schlock!

Last year while flipping through the pages of one of my favorite Christian magazines, I was jolted by a catalog insert advertising "Christian" clothing, promoted like the high-priced stuff from Banana Republic. There were "Fruit of the Spirit" shirts—far more spiritual than Fruit of the Loom—that come in plum, tangerine and raspberry. Women could order a shapely "Magdala" sweater—similar to that worn by Mary Magdalene. *Gasp!*

A reserved British friend, who had seen the same ad, wrote in justified protest: "It is enough to make one lose one's lunch."

Americans are blind to how our cultural Christianity is viewed by the suffering church overseas. One Nepalese Christian, who had just been released from prison after three years of horrible torture for the crime of teaching a Bible class in his village, wasn't very impressed when he came to the States. Shortly after he arrived, a well-meaning *schlockmeister* gave him a "Jiving for

Jesus" T-shirt with a picture of a Christian rock group on the back. When asked why he didn't wear it, he politely replied he couldn't wear short-sleeve shirts. He needed something to protect the still-tender scars on his arms where the prison guards had burned him with a red-hot poker.

I'll never forget the sad expression on his face as he sat in front of a TV set watching a certain American televangelist, wearing a sequined vest and weighted down with so much gold he would sink if tossed into a baptistry, talk about "taking up the cross."

Not all merchandising is religious garbage, of course. Works of art. Christian symbols. All have their place, as long as they are in good taste. I thank God for those who create works of art for the glory of God—and for those who distribute them. We have a number of beautiful plaques on the walls of our home with Scripture messages on them. My wife sometimes wears a tiny gold dove around her neck. She purchases greeting cards and personal stationery with Christian symbols and Bible verses—all done in good taste. I have a small silver "fish" embossed on the front of my attache case, hoping it will serve as a conversation starter on airplane trips. I am grateful for works of art—great and small.

But before buying such items I always ask myself one question: If Jesus were here today, would He buy this? Can you imagine our Lord riding a donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with a bumper sticker on its rump: "Bray if you love Jehovah?"

Shoddy junk, cheap merchandising, the inferior trash that floods the Christian marketplace in the name of our Lord and Savior should have no place in our lives. As we enter the '90s, God is calling His children to holiness and excellence. That means, among other things, no more schlock. ■