



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Not Marching,
but Dancing
(*Membership*, pp. 19-26)

Suggested Article:

📖 Gathered to Listen
(*Membership*, pp. 38-39)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Not Marching, but Dancing

An ornery professor who went to church from no apparent personal desire, C. S. Lewis has much to teach us about the nature of membership. He staunchly affirms that the Church has a place in the modern world because it alone can sustain the sort of membership in which human life is fulfilled.

Prayer

God, we confess that we do not know how to be members of a community; we do not know how to overcome evil with good, how to love our enemies, how to be children of God. Sometimes we do not want to be members of a community. Forgive us. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:4-8

Meditation†

The Christian is called not to individualism but to membership in the mystical body [of Christ]. ... We are summoned from the outset to combine as creatures with our Creator, as mortals with immortal, as redeemed sinners with sinless Redeemer. His presence, the interaction between Him and us, must always be the overwhelmingly dominate factor in the life we are to lead within the Body, and any conception of Christian fellowship which does not mean primarily fellowship with Him is out of court.

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

Reflection

C. S. Lewis was “an astute analyst of his world,” note Lindsey Brigham and Wayne Martindale. He saw that “all attempts at membership outside the Church overemphasize either the individual or the collective, making true membership impossible.”

He believed individualism “makes membership impossible because it leads to a self-sufficient, self-centered confidence that regards other people as largely irrelevant.” In this narrative, other people and even God become less valuable than the individual, existing only to serve his or her needs. Far from freeing individuals to accomplish their full potential, however, this stance actually impairs people by preventing them from acknowledging their inevitable limitation and accepting help.

Collectivism, on the other hand, “undermines membership by leading to a callous insensitivity to the unique needs and gifts people carry.” Lewis calls collectivism “an outrage upon human nature.” By valuing people only for characteristics which are useful to the system, it degrades or eliminates their unique traits which are not. Diverse people with different strengths and weaknesses are reduced to uniform cogs in a machine.

Individualism and collectivism are diametrically opposed stances, but Lewis warns “one error begets the other and, far from neutralizing, they aggravate each other.” We often witness their strange partnership in a consumerist culture. Consider how advertising works. “Ads are created with a collectivist attitude by considering a group of potential consumers, isolating their habits and tastes, and then appealing to these uniform, decontextualized tendencies,” Brigham and Martindale



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observe. "Yet consumers are often motivated to heed advertisements by their individualistic longing to define themselves by brand names, to design the perfect life setting, to construct a unique life story."

The safe passage between these modern Scylla and Charybdis is true Pauline membership in the body of Christ, opposed to the fragmentation of both individualism and collectivism. Members of Christ's body are not self-sufficient, but neither are they uniform parts in a collective. They are unique organs created with particular purposes that complement one another for the common good of the body. This sort of complementariness, which makes it possible for members to serve and govern one another peacefully, is only possible because the head of the body transcends their merely human interests.

It is the headship of the incarnate God-man Jesus Christ that sets the Church apart from other, insufficient forms of human membership: "Under the headship of Christ, the body's members are reassembled, their health is restored, and Spirit-life is breathed into their dry bones," Brigham and Martindale write. In Christ, true unity in diversity is founded and maintained.

They acknowledge that this ideal is not fully realized in the Church in this fallen world. Church membership can be more characterized by strife than "harmonious diversity and purposeful order." Yet, despite the struggle involved, "to be a Christian is to be part of Christ's body, and God has ordained that on this earth that body manifests itself in and through the Church."

For C. S. Lewis, church membership was not optional. Luckily, "the obligatory nature of church membership means that, in some sense, those who faithfully participate in Church from duty may eventually receive more benefits from it than from any merely human sort of Christian fellowship," Brigham and Martindale conclude. Indeed, "when we faithfully practice church membership in obedience to Jesus Christ, true transformation and joy will inevitably happen."

Study Questions

1. While modern individualism and collectivism are opposites, C. S. Lewis believes that they "aggravate" rather than "neutralize" each other. What does he mean by this?
2. How can church membership form (what Lewis calls) "the almost fantastic variety of the saints," rather than the "monotonously alike worldlings" churned out by collectives?
3. Why, according to Lewis, is church membership obligatory for Christians? How does this undermine contemporary notions of individualistic religion?
4. Identify the primary temptations toward individualism and collectivism in your congregation. How can you resist them?
5. How does Laura James, in her painting *Sermon on the Mount*, depict both the unity and the diversity that ideally characterize Christ's body, the Church?

Departing Hymn: "United by God's Grace"

† C. S. Lewis, "Membership" (1945), in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (New York, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1976 [1949]), 110.

Not Marching, but Dancing

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how modern individualism and collectivism are opposed to true membership.
2. To understand how true Pauline membership, founded on the headship of Jesus Christ, is the path to harmonious unity of diverse individuals.
3. To discuss the temptations toward individualism or collectivism in your congregation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Membership (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

In his reflection on the Pauline concept of membership, C. S. Lewis wrote, "Equality is for me in the same position as clothes. It is a result of the Fall and the remedy for it. Any attempt to retrace the steps by which we have arrived at egalitarianism and to reintroduce the old authorities on the political level is for me as foolish as it would be to take off our clothes..."

"[Yet,] equality is a quantitative term and therefore love often knows nothing of it. Authority exercised with humility and obedience accepted with delight are the very lines along which our spirits live. Even in the life of the affections, much more in the Body of Christ, we step outside that world which says 'I am as good as you.' It is like turning from a march to a dance. It is like taking off our clothes. We become, as Chesterton said, taller when we bow; we become lowlier when we instruct. It delights me that there should be moments in the services of my own Church when the priest stands and I kneel. ..."

"In this way then, the Christian life defends the single personality from the collective, not by isolating him but by giving him the status of an organ in the mystical Body."

C. S. Lewis, "Membership" (1945), in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (New York, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1976 [1949]), 115-116.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 12:4-8 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study focuses on the modern errors of individualism and collectivism that make it difficult for us to understand and live out Christian membership. Lindsey Brigham and Wayne Martindale highlight C. S. Lewis's account of these errors and expand on it with examples and insights of their own. As members of Christ's body, we do not proudly isolate ourselves in supposed self-sufficiency, nor are we redundant parts of a whole. Instead, we flourish together in a diversity that allows us to better serve and govern one another in obedience to Christ, our head.

Study Questions

1. C. S. Lewis sees individualism and collectivism as two sides of the same coin: each one overemphasizes an element of how people relate in community. If we treat individualism as the solution to collectivism, or vice versa, we will swing on a pendulum of error. To focus on which error is worse is to play into the devil's hands: "He always sends errors into the world in pairs – pairs of opposites," Lewis says. "He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one." Instead, we should "keep our eyes on the goal [of membership under the headship of Christ] and go straight through between both errors. We have no other concern than that with either of them."
2. Like organs in a human body, church members are united to one another not by their uniformity, but through their harmonious diversity of strengths and interdependent purposes. Submitting to Christ as the head of the body does not obliterate members' personalities; it restores health to each one in their particularity and facilitates their mutual service and governance. As members faithfully pursue their distinct missions, they grow freely into their diverse giftedness – what C. S. Lewis calls "the almost fantastic variety of the saints." Consider the diversity of saints in history (e.g., Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, and Mother Theresa) or in the holy people of your own congregation.

Those who reject membership in the body of Christ tend to fall prey to the mirror errors of individualism and collectivism. These 'worldly' patterns of association produce "monotonously alike worldlings" who are similar to one another in their worn out patterns of sin and dissatisfaction. Recall Lindsey Brigham and Wayne Martindale's discussion of consumerism: in trying to create self-determined identities, consumers ironically become easy to manipulate by collectivist advertisement strategies.

3. Brigham and Martindale summarize Lewis's view: "To be a Christian is to be part of Christ's body, and God has ordained that on this earth that body manifests itself in and through the Church." We cannot claim to follow Christ if we ignore where and how he has chosen to live and operate in this world. "The New Testament does not envisage solitary religion," C. S. Lewis wrote: "some kind of regular assembly for worship and instruction is everywhere taken for granted in the Epistles. So we must be regular practicing members of the Church."

Discuss what it means to be "regular practicing members of the Church" in your congregation. Do you have a system or program for church membership? If so, how does this reflect the membership congregants have in the mystical body of Christ?

4. Form two small groups to focus on the temptations toward individualism and collectivism. See if their conclusions dovetail in ways predicted by Lewis. The 'collectivism group' might notice the pressing similarities in lifestyle, dress, social practices, wealth, ethnicity, and so on that characterize the congregation. Are these the result of considered Christian reflection, or patterns of social conformity? The 'individualism group' might notice how members deal with problems (job loss, difficult relationships, disease) as individuals. Look for points of convergence: e.g., does *everyone* own a *specialty* Bible tailored to their chosen peer group?
5. The cruciform figure of Jesus unites the listening members in Laura James's *Sermon on the Mount*. There is a "subtlety of diverse elements within James's unified and harmonious composition," Heidi Hornik explains. "Though the disciples appear at first to be just a simplified, bright, balanced mass of color, on closer inspection they are individuals with varying facial characteristics, hairstyle, clothing type and color, and gesture or hand position. Despite the patterned repetition of these features, no two figures in the image are exactly the same."

Departing Hymn

"United by God's Grace" is on pp. 46-47 of *Membership*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.