



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Discovering Our True Identity
(*Consumerism*, pp. 32-38)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Which Kingdom?
(*Consumerism*, pp. 83-89)
- 📖 Past the Blockade
(*Consumerism*, pp. 48-50)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Discovering Our True Identity

Consumerism can encourage the least attractive human traits—avarice, aggression, and self-centeredness. By giving us a new identity as members of God’s Body, the Eucharist can form us in fidelity, other-centeredness, and proper joy, which are counter-cultural to the ethos of consumer culture.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Responsive Reading†

Bread of the world, in mercy broken,
Wine of the soul, in mercy shed,
**By whom the words of life were spoken,
And in whose death our sins are dead.**

Look on the heart by sorrow broken,
Look on the tears by sinners shed;
**And be Thy feast to us the token,
That by Thy grace our souls are fed.**

Reflection

“Consumerism is more than the mere creation and consumption of goods and services,” Medley writes. It encourages the mistaken belief that our needs can only be satisfied by excessive consumption. Soon consumers “need to need and desire to desire. Instead of consuming goods themselves, they consume the *meanings* of goods as those have been constructed through advertising and marketing. In a sense, they become what they buy.” Examples are easy to find: we buy “Harley-Davidson motorcycles to symbolize personal freedom, Nike shoes to suggest ‘I want to be like Mike,’ and clothing from Abercrombie and Fitch to communicate chic casualness.” We buy self-images that are greedily centered on competition and self-promotion.

To Christians caught up in self-centeredness and competition, Paul writes: “Examine yourselves,...then eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28). Share the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, in the right spirit. For at the table we *receive* our true identities as children of God and are prepared to resist the identities proffered by our consumerist culture. As often as we eat the bread and drink from the cup, as Augustine reminds us, we receive the mystery of ourselves. The Eucharist:

▶ *forms us in faithfulness.* Consumerism encourages us “to be deeply committed to being uncommitted,” says Medley, “to flit from one thing to another in the search for that ‘missing something.’” Planned obsolescence and disposability become virtues in products we buy and relationships we consume. In contrast, the Supper celebrates God’s abiding and abundant presence, and faithfulness to humanity. “In performing the story of God’s faithfulness, the Eucharist calls us to faithfulness” to Christ and one another around the table.

▶ *cultivates hospitality.* We tend to treat one another as commodities, or as vendors of services for which we’ve contracted. The Eucharist counters this self-centeredness by teaching us



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to pay loving attention to God, God's creation, and our fellow humanity. It "reminds us that God's grace comes not only in the form of bread and wine, but also in the form of flesh and blood." We cannot properly receive the Supper, the Apostle Paul teaches, without embracing the other persons at the table as the living Body of Christ.

► *points us toward true joy.* "Consumer culture tempts us to take delight primarily in what the world has to offer," but we were created to delight in the one true God. "When our lives are marked by a spirit of joy that flows from authentic praise and thanksgiving for God's abundant care," Medley observes, "our covetousness will be checked." We will find the contentment that we seek not in the "brands" we consume, but in fellowship with the giving and forgiving Creator.

Paul's warning to the Corinthian church reminds us how easily our church practices are co-opted or deformed by the very consumerist values we should be resisting. Indeed, "the way many churches imitate the techniques of...advertising and marketing," Barry Harvey observes, "transforms the body of Christ into yet another culture industry, one more vendor of products and services for mass consumption. Church [practices are]...refitted to accord with the preferences of 'target populations' who have been raised to think of themselves almost exclusively as self-interested consumers."

Study Questions

1. How was self-centeredness and competition disrupting the fellowship of the Corinthian church? How did Paul counter those distortions with his description of the Lord's Supper?
2. Is the Lord's Supper a frequent and central part of your congregation's worship? How do you accent the themes of fidelity, hospitality, and joy through relationship with God?
3. "The application of Jesus' temple-clearing is not to mandate what can or can't be sold in a church building," Craig Blomberg says, but the issue of "when we allow church to be turned into a business in ways that compromise worship" (pp. 24-25). How does J. M. W. Turner's *Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple* (pp. 48-50) develop this issue?
4. In what ways do churches pitch their "activities, convictions, architecture, and liturgy...to accord with the preferences of 'target populations' who have been raised to think of themselves almost exclusively as self-interested consumers"? How is this dangerous to the communication of the gospel?
5. Comment on Harvey's statement: "[After September 11], the airwaves and print media were filled with ads elevating conspicuous consumption to a quasi-patriotic duty. These appeals for all good Americans to return to habits of unrestrained consumption are far more revealing about ourselves...than we might like to think" (p. 89).

Departing Hymn: "O God, You Own a Thousand Hills"

'Reginald Heber, "Bread of the World, In Mercy Broken," from *Hymns Written and Adapted to the Weekly Service of the Church Year* (1827).

Discovering Our True Identity

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how consumerism is a character-cultivating way of life that constructs or ‘sells’ identity.
2. To examine how we receive our true identity by observing the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist, and are formed in fidelity, hospitality, and true joy.
3. To explore how easily church practices are co-opted or deformed by the very consumerist values we should be resisting.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Consumerism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Share the story of the American college students who chose the Coca Cola jingle to represent their culture to students from other countries. It begins, “Historian Lendol Calder recalls from college days the following ‘icebreaker’ event at a Christian camp” (*Consumerism*, p. 32).

Conclude with Mark Medley’s observation: “Calder’s memory is a disturbing story because it reveals consumerism to be an ethos, a character-cultivating way of life, a way of life that constructs or ‘sells’ identity.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members may grow into their new identity in Christ as members of God’s Body and experience the joy that comes through fidelity to God and one another.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Consumerism as a character-cultivating way of life: engaging in its practices of excessive consumption changes the sort of persons that we are. Observing the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist, is likewise a character-shaping practice, but it is counter-cultural and opposed to our formation by consumerist practices.

The Eucharist is opposed to consumerist lifestyles in two important ways. First, it encourages traits of fidelity, hospitality, and proper joy derived from a relationship with God; these are opposite of some traits encouraged by consumerism—fickleness (“being committed to being uncommitted”), self-centeredness and aggression toward others, and covetousness of material things. Second, the Eucharist reminds

us that we *receive* our true identity (as a member of God's Body) as a gift, rather than seize it or obtain it by merit. Consumerism tempts us to think that we *create* (and change) our real identity by consumption of "brands," or *earn* our identity as a consumer when we obtain the resources to purchase products. So, the opposition is not only at the first level of what sort of person we shall become, but at the second level of how we are related to our true identity (as one who receives of a gracious gift, or one who earns a treasured and competitive prize).

This rivalry between the Eucharist and the character-forming practices of the consumerist culture shows up in another way. The Lord's Supper is easily distorted by the very consumerist traits the church should be resisting. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians highlights this fact by condemning that church's self-centered, competitive approach to the table, but nevertheless recommending that when the Lord's Supper is consumed rightly, it bears the power to shape their identities anew.

The final remarks by Barry Harvey should encourage members to consider how other practices of the church are threatened by consumerist values.

Study Questions

1. The divisions among the members indicate the Corinthians were not really eating the *Lord's* supper (1 Corinthians 11:20). Probably the church met in the homes of the rich, and they competed to provide lavish meals for one another, but left little food for the poor ("those who have nothing," v. 22). In the *Lord's* supper, Paul says, Jesus *shares* the bread and wine, and thereby *shares himself*. In taking the supper, we *proclaim the Lord's death*—that is, we gladly acknowledge that our salvation and true good depends upon his death, and is not something we accomplish for ourselves. Thus all of us are equally dependent upon and equally nourished by his body and blood.
2. Encourage members to reflect on how often and when the Supper is observed. The manner of passing the bread and wine may accentuate the theme of hospitality and concern for others. Some churches have special offerings for the needy at the end of their observance. Members may mention particular scripture readings, hymns, testimonies, or sermons that accented the themes described in this study.
3. Heidi Hornik comments on a visual element of Turner's painting: "As viewers we are led to the temple from this outer courtyard by a strong diagonal light, but these human figures meld into a wall or blockade between us and the temple entrance. The religious authorities, who exploit the sincerity of the worshipers for financial gain, were a problem then as they may be now" (p. 50). Jesus is depicted as clearing a path through the confusing blockade.
4. Encourage members to prayerfully consider the practices of their own congregation as well as the noted excesses reported in other congregations, such as a "health and wealth" message, an emphasis on entertainment and neglect of confession in worship, or a "life-style" approach to attract a particular clientele. He quotes Budde and Brimlow's concern that the most pressing question "is not whether capitalist culture will continue to shape hearts and imaginations more thoroughly than the Way of the Cross, but whether the church will produce people able to tell the difference between the two" (p. 89). In other words, the church might mistake the expectations of the consumerist culture with Jesus' demands, and the 'success' of its advertising and marketing strategies with people's deep and transforming acceptance of the Gospel.
5. Perhaps these appeals reveal how thin our conception of patriotism is. Is the only sacrifice required today that we take on a bit more consumer debt? Is our commitment to the common good reduced to a duty to increase the quarterly sales figures of major companies?

Departing Hymn

"O God, You Own a Thousand Hills" is on pp. 52-53 of *Consumerism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.