



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Beyond Candy Cane Lane
(*Consumerism*, pp. 76-82)

Suggested Article:

📖 From Francis to Fezziwig
(*Consumerism*, pp. 71-75)

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

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
PO Box 97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Beyond Candy Cane Lane

Our Christmas cheer can quickly turn sour as mass marketing, frenzied shopping, shortened tempers, burgeoning debt, and an exhausting calendar of activities overwhelm us. How can we celebrate Christ's birth with joyful simplicity that is much more than cutting back for the sake of cutting back?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 96

Responsive Reading (from Titus 2:11-15a):

Declare these things:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Reflection

Christians around the world celebrate Christmas Day with a lectionary reading from Psalm 96. Its praise of the Lord as King of the universe echoes in their hearts as a glad welcome of King Jesus. Why do all the peoples sing, and why does the creation rejoice? The world's true King has come to judge it with equity, righteousness, and truth (96:10, 13). Paired with this psalm in the lectionary is a confession from Titus 2:11-14—we dwell in an in-between time, for we are redeemed by “the grace of God,” but wait for the full “manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” In “the present age,” we are being “trained” and “purified” to live in righteousness and equity. This, proclaims the church, is the good news of Christmas Day.

This message is often obscured, Schobert warns, by “the celebratory excess of America's real religion, consumer capitalism.” In early America, Christians endorsed quiet worship at Christmas, and some even tried to stamp out raucous public holiday celebrations. Yet the most successful trend originated in the northeastern cities with the invention of Santa Claus and other “nostalgic traditions of home and hearth.” Soon retailers used Santa Claus to promote shopping and family gift-giving. “Once this commercialization took root, as early as the 1830s, helped along by the rise of advertising, marketing, and the industrial production of goods, it was only a matter of time until consumerism replaced public rowdiness and drowned out the angelic choruses announcing the Newborn King.” To disentangle Christmas from consumerism, he suggests that we:

- ▶ *root festivities in the church year.* “In an academic calendar, Christmas is ‘time off’ sandwiched between semesters, and in the secular calendar, it's the crown jewel of year-ending holidays, Thanksgiving-Christmas-New Year's Eve. Only



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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the church calendar places Christmas in its true context—following the penitential season of Advent and before the redemptive events of Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.”

- ▶ *shop subversively*. When we buy fair-trade gifts, we announce the good news of righteousness and equity. “As much as forty percent of a fair-trade item’s retail price is returned to the producer and reinvested in community development projects like education, healthcare, sanitation, or micro-loan programs,” Schobert reports. “It can be a refreshing alternative to storming the shopping malls.”

Study Questions

1. How does the carol “What Child is This?” locate Christmas celebrations within their true context in the church year?
2. Review your Christmas gift-giving in light of our “training ... in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly” (Titus 2:12). In addition to fair-trade gifts, do other sorts of gifts to family and friends declare the good news of righteousness and equity for all peoples?
3. “We can have festivity without selling out to Mammon, without embracing the greedy trappings of a consumer culture,” Katie Cook writes. How does Fezziwig, like Jesus, show how “to celebrate without shutting their eyes to the terribly real pain all around them” (*Consumerism*, p. 73, 75)?

Departing Hymn: “What Child is This?”

What Child is this who, laid to rest
on Mary’s lap is sleeping;
whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
while shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

Why lies He in such mean estate,
where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here
the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
the cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,
come peasant, king to own Him;
the King of kings salvation brings,
let loving hearts enthrone Him.
Raise, raise a song on high,
the virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
the Babe, the Son of Mary.

William C. Dix, from The Manger Throne (1865)
Suggested Tune: GREENSLEEVES

Beyond Candy Cane Lane

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	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the commercialization of Christmas in North America grew from an attempt to replace raucous public parties with family celebrations and gift-giving.
2. To explore the meaning of Christmas within the church year.
3. To evaluate our Christmas gift-giving in light of the biblical call to live self-controlled, godly lives which reflect God's righteousness and equity toward all people.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 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 article before the group meeting. Locate the hymn "What Child is This?" in your church's hymnal.

Begin with a Story

Share Matthew Schobert's description of Candy Cane Lane: "In a small town not far from where I grew up in southern Illinois, immediately following Thanksgiving a typical middle-class neighborhood transforms into Candy Cane Lane—the region's largest display of lights, seasonal greetings, holiday characters, and manger scenes Spectator-packed vehicles throng to tour this street and admire its decorations. The diffuse glow in the surrounding night sky over Candy Cane Lane that marks the celebratory excess of America's real religion, consumer capitalism, obscures the radiance of the Infant's star" (*Consumerism*, p. 77).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close by asking God to train us to be the sort of givers who reflect God's own gift-giving in Jesus Christ.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read aloud Psalm 96 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

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

Reflection

The strain of living Christ-like lives within a consumerist culture is nowhere more apparent than in our celebration of the Christmas season. Invite members to brainstorm on the many ways in which the festivities have been commercialized. They might mention the pressures to sponsor and attend extravagant parties, lavishly decorate our houses inside and out, extend gift-giving into the workplace, use gift-giving to advance business interests, shop repeatedly and often for "bargains," measure our gifts by their "suggested list price," anticipate and meet our children's inflated desires for the season, and gauge our gift-giving practices by the standards in the community.

This study focuses on the commercialization of Christmas gift-giving to family and friends. The brief historical background on this practice (see *Consumerism*, pp. 77-78) will help members understand how we arrived at “Candy Cane Lane.” From Psalm 96 and Titus 2:11-14 we can draw biblical standards to evaluate our current practices of gift-giving: they should reflect God’s concern for righteousness and equity for all peoples, and they be “good deeds” that are self-controlled, righteous, and godly. That is, our Christmas gift-giving (1) should be for our family and friends’ good, rather than for personal display or “buying their love” (in desperate attempts to replace a lack of our continuous love and support for them); and (2) reflect our concern for righteousness and equity for all peoples. Christmas gift-giving is an opportunity for us to practice giving to others as God has given to us in Christ Jesus.

If we fear that simplifying our gift-giving will lessen the joy of Christmas, Katie Cook points us to Jesus, Francis of Assisi, and the character of Fezziwig in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, as those who can teach us to create and enjoy festivity on a dime. “They knew how to celebrate without shutting their eyes to the terribly real pain all around them.”

Study Questions

1. To the question, “What child is this?” the first verse responds that Jesus is “the King” of the world whom we, like the angels and shepherds, should laud, or praise. The third verse completes this thought by inviting peasants and kings to “own,” or acknowledge, his kingship.

Yet the full meaning of Jesus’ kingship requires this striking transition in the second verse: Jesus is both the creator of the universe, “the Word,” and its redeemer, “the Word made flesh.” Suddenly the sinners, who are sincerely pleading for mercy in Advent and Lent, are joined in their plea by the Lord of the universe: “for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.” The mystery of this is not explained, but exemplified on Good Friday: “Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.” In the carol, the baby Jesus’ birth, and the joy and worship that it elicits, make sense only when placed in the larger context of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

2. Members may discuss how we ‘lose control’ of our gift-giving, not only buying more than we can afford, but also giving others more than it is good for them to receive. Perhaps our gifts actually draw attention away from the good news of Christmas—the coming of the King who reigns in righteousness and equity.

If we keep family gift-giving as a central part of Christmas festivities, how can we practice “self-control” that is “upright and godly”? Schobert recommends fair-trade gifts because they remind the giver and recipient of the needs of others in the world; they can express not only the giver’s love for family and friends, but also concern for righteousness and equity for all peoples. Other gifts that accomplish this include: (1) honoring a recipient by giving a gift that serves others in her name—e.g., by an animal purchased through Heifer International, or donation to The Salvation Army, Oxfam, or other Christian aid society; (2) endorsing and supporting a recipient’s short-term mission work or charity work; and (3) limiting the amount spent on Christmas gifts within the family or circle of friends, so that they can afford to serve others collectively, perhaps by offering hospitality to someone who is new in the community or will celebrate a Christmas without family or friends.

Encourage members to discuss ways to lower the cost of Christmas giving, or to replace purchased gifts entirely with creative gifts to one another of time and assistance.

3. Fezziwig knows the secret of providing happiness without great financial cost. Perhaps the details are in the planning of the party, the choosing of the gifts, and the sincere, personal involvement in the lives of the recipients. Like Jesus and Francis, Fezziwig invited some of the people at the margins in his community. How can members throw this sort of party?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.