

# Discovering Our True Identity

BY MARK S. MEDLEY

Consumerism, as a character-cultivating way of life, encourages the least attractive human traits—avarice, aggression, and self-centeredness. By giving us a new identity as members of God’s very Body, the Eucharist can form us in fidelity, other-centeredness, and proper joy, which are counter-cultural to the ethos of consumer culture. As often as we eat the bread and drink from the cup, Augustine reminds us, we receive the mystery of ourselves.

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Historian Lendol Calder recalls from college days this “icebreaker” event at a Christian camp. Campers, grouped by their nationalities, were asked to sing a song representing their culture to the rest of the assembly. Most groups quickly agreed on a song, usually an indigenous folk song, and were ready to perform in ten to twenty minutes. The lone group that had not accomplished this simple task was the Americans. They debated for an hour before they could settle on a song—Coca Cola’s jingle “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing.” These American college students were not bound together by patriotic tunes, folk melodies, or even Christian songs. They were united by commercial culture.

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. It is a way of life that militates against Christian

virtues of love and joy, patience and contentedness, self-discipline and self-denial. But consumerism does so, writes Rodney Clapp, “with a velvet glove rather than an iron fist. It speaks in sweet and sexy tones rather than dictatorial ones, and it conquers by promises rather than threats.”<sup>1</sup>

Some features of consumer capitalism inevitably run counter to Christian discipleship. Yet in Christian communities we can resist and contest the ethos of consumer capitalism every time we receive the Eucharist.

### **CONSECRATED CONSUMERISM**

In a “postmodern” world that is characterized by emergence, novelty, contingency, and flux, we are constantly reshaping ourselves by how and what we consume. “Consumerism, that is the lifestyles and cultures structured around consumption, is a defining feature of the postmodern,” observes sociologist David Lyon in *Jesus in Disneyland*.<sup>2</sup> Advertising is a fundamental enterprise in our culture for generating and maneuvering markets. Ads orchestrate our desires as consumers and they provide us various identities to buy and sell.

In the United States, we now spend nearly six *trillion* dollars a year, most of it on consumer goods. For example, we spend more money on shoes, jewelry, and watches (\$80 billion) than on higher education (\$65 billion), and we’ve constructed over twice as many shopping centers as high schools.<sup>3</sup> “Shopping is the chief cultural activity in the US,” notes James Twitchell, with the shopping center supplanting the church building as a symbol of cultural values.<sup>4</sup> Megamalls, like The Mall of America in Minneapolis, are the great “cathedrals of consumerism” to which we make “pilgrimage” in order to practice our consumer religion.

As a character-cultivating way of life, consumerism encourages some of the least attractive human traits—avarice, aggression, and self-centeredness. Arguably, these traits have produced the highest standard of living in recorded history, but they are ultimately without a moral compass and threaten to undermine social order. More importantly, these traits, now lauded as virtues in our culture, are antithetical to the Christian way of life. Clearly, when our lives are greedily centered on competition and profits, this will destroy sacrifice, fidelity, patience, and contentment.<sup>5</sup>

*Consumerism* is much more than the mere creation and consumption of goods and services. Consumerism is kindled, according to sociologist Jean Baudrillard, only when people come to mythically believe they have certain “needs” that can only be satisfied through consumption. From that point, they 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. Consumers develop a sense of who they are and what they want to become through consumption, or “I consume, therefore, I am,” to adapt Descartes’ famous dictum. Rather than to keep up with the Joneses or the

Smiths in their neighborhoods, they consume to express personal style and taste. Hence, they do not merely buy goods and services for pleasure, but primarily “consumers identify their values and commitments by internalizing the symbolic meanings of commodities” they purchase.<sup>6</sup> They purchase Harley-Davidson motorcycles to symbolize personal freedom, Nike shoes to suggest “I want to be like Mike,” and clothing from Abercrombie and

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Fitch to communicate chic casualness. They embrace these “brands” to characterize their lifestyles, personal relationships, and self-images.

In constantly “trying on” new clothes and fashions, then, postmodern consumers are putting on new identities and fresh personalities. Indeed, “being an individual” has been reduced to the ability to collect, organize, and consume commodities.

Ironically, advertising, packaging, fashion, and branding so strongly influence the way consumers build up and maintain their identities, Twitchell suggests, they become fashioned or branded in the image and likeness of the commodities they purchase. Today’s commercials and advertisements do not merely mirror our needs, desires, trends, or definitions of coolness and chicness; rather, we purchase the branded and packaged coolness constructed and marketed to us.<sup>7</sup> “Merchants of Cool,” an enlightening yet profoundly disturbing PBS Frontline documentary, evidences this intentional “hocking” of identity. It reveals the convergence of advertising, marketing, and mass media—particularly television—in the selling of identity to young American adolescents.

#### **RECEIVING OUR IDENTITY IN THE EUCHARIST**

The church is both a servant and herald of the kingdom of God in the midst of other kingdoms and communities of the world that attempt to shape our understanding of reality and identity. The world often opposes, derides, ignores, or has other priorities than the kingdom of God. It is to the world’s kingdoms and communities that the church, as apostolic community, is sent.

Calling the church “apostolic” implies it is distinct from the world. It “is in the world but not of the world;” that is, the church is in the world geographically, historically, and culturally, yet it differs from the world

because the church takes its cues from Jesus Christ who has sent it out by the power of his Spirit. This points to a profound tension at the heart of being a Christian. The North American church today shares a common cultural identity with other North Americans. It is deeply rooted in its particular culture contexts; it shares the language as well as some of the values and practices of the culture in which it lives. At the same time, the church's loyalty to Jesus Christ leads it to embody an alternative vision of life that quite often conflicts with the surrounding culture. Christians are called to be distinctive by virtue of the biblical narrative that shapes their lives, to speak a different language and practice a different way of life. Therefore, the church must discriminate between the elements of culture that are neutral in value, those that can be positively affirmed, and those that must be criticized, resisted, and rejected.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of "consecrated consumerism" noted above, the contemporary North American church should reject the dominant values of today's culture of consumerism, commercialism, and commodification. It has resources for resisting the efforts of "consecrated consumerism" to construct and market certain identities for us to buy and wear. By participating in the practices of the church, the people of God, empowered by the Spirit, are formed to live the pattern of Jesus' life. We might examine various church practices, such as baptism, discernment, forgiveness, and hospitality, but I will explore the practice of the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper.

This is not to say that our church practice of the Supper is never co-opted or deformed by the very consumerist values we should be resisting. For instance, the apostle Paul rebukes some Christians at Corinth for showing "contempt for the church of God" when they "humiliate those who have nothing" by hoarding the whole of their common meal before the poorer members could gather (1 Corinthians 11:22). These who "eat and drink without discerning the body" and caring for its members, Paul says, "eat and drink judgment against themselves" (11:29). But when the Lord's Supper is consumed rightly, it bears the power to shape our identities anew.

The consumer of the Supper should be formed in habits, affections, and dispositions that are counter-cultural to the ethos of a consumer culture. How does eucharistic practice subvert the false identities and values marketed to us? By giving us a new identity as members of God's very Body. The practice of the Eucharist should cultivate fidelity, other-centeredness, and proper joy in the consumers of bread and cup at the table of great thanksgiving. As often as we eat the bread and drink from the cup, as Augustine reminds us, we receive the mystery of ourselves.

### **FIDELITY**

In the Eucharist, the triune God, who is eternally rich in love and fellowship, freely and graciously shares that life of love with humanity in

Jesus Christ. Sharing life with others, whatever the cost, is God's way of being.

The Eucharist cultivates in participants the virtue of fidelity, or faithfulness, grounded in the faithfulness of God toward us. In contrast, contemporary advertising cultivates not only a worship of unlimited choice but also a "paradoxical" loyalty to the transitory and fleeting. As consumers, we are, in short, encouraged to be deeply committed to being uncommitted. Consumerism encourages us to flit from one thing to another in the search for that "missing something." As a result, convictions and practices of faithfulness rarely get the chance to sprout, let alone thrive. Consider the value placed on disposability—the disposability of many products (eating utensils, razors, contact lenses, diapers) and "planned obsolescence" of other merchandise, the disposability of relationships (exhibited when we dissolve a marriage or drop a friendship if it no longer benefits us), and the disposability of churches (seen in jumping from one congregation to another when a congregation no longer fulfills our needs).

The Lord's Supper resists this commitment to being uncommitted by celebrating God's abiding and abundant presence. The practice of breaking bread and sharing cup together reminds the church that God is faithful to his promises, is faithful to humanity. And in performing the story of God's faithfulness, the Eucharist calls us to faithfulness. In an economy that lifts up the lack of fidelity as a virtue, we resist simply by abiding; and we learn how to abide before the Christ and others at the table.

### **OTHER-CENTEREDNESS**

We gather around the table in order to remember a story that counters self-interestedness and cultivates hospitality. In this way the Eucharist challenges our culture's narcissism, its temptation to guide all aspects of life by self-interest.

Consumerism encourages us to view others as commodities, as objects to be exploited for our benefit. It abusively turns the freedom of the market into a freedom from each other or a right to exploit one another for the sake of self. The Lord's Supper, however, 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.

The people who gather around the table are the body of Christ as they bless, receive, and consume the elements. When we open our hands to God in Christ in order to receive the gift of grain and fruit, as well as the gift of our true identity, we must also open our hands to others. Otherwise, we do violence to the very life-giving mystery at the heart of the church's life.<sup>9</sup>

So, the practice of table feasting and "facing" cultivates a way of life that resists the commodification of our relationships. The Eucharist schools us in the art of paying attention to others; it draws the focus away from ourselves and redirects it toward God, God's creation, and our fellow hu-

manity. As we are shaped by the habit of facing Christ and others in this great feast of thanksgiving, we become keenly aware that an aspect of worshipping the triune God is to be present for and in communion with others.

### **PROPER JOY**

In the midst of a culture that celebrates insatiable desire, the Eucharist points us toward our true joy. Consumer culture urges us to pursue our individually-defined pleasures, provided they can be purchased in the market. Friendship, intimacy, and love become the objects we should buy and consume in the same manner that we purchase toothpaste, CDs, SUVs, or the latest technological gadget. To be happy (and define our identity), we are told to chase after more things and services. These twin pursuits, of pleasure for its own sake and of more and more things, are robbing us of our ability to experience genuine joy.

Consumer culture tempts us to take delight primarily in what the world has to offer. Now desire is not necessarily a bad affection. Christians are not called to refrain from desiring; we are called to desire the one true God (Psalm 42:1). God certainly wants us to enjoy the goodness of creation, but the creation and its pleasures should not become our idols.<sup>10</sup>

The Eucharist reminds us that true joy flows from a meal in which we claim again and again

humanity's created intention: "to glorify God and to enjoy God forever." At the table we delight in God as the creator of humanity as well as the grain and fruit shared in the meal. We delight in God as our redeemer in the crucified and risen Christ. And we are freed by the Holy Spirit to reclaim our identities as children of this giving and forgiving God. Even as we taste bread and wine, we glimpse with awe, wonder, and anticipation God's act of reconciliation and glorification.

When our lives are marked by a spirit of joy that flows from authentic praise and thanksgiving for God's abundant care, our covetousness will be checked. We will dwell daily in the joy of God's abiding presence in our lives together as the *ekklesia*, the "called out" community. We will find the contentment we seek, not in the "brands" we consume and wear, but in the

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experience again and again of the wellspring of true joy, the God who transforms us and our relationships with all the rest of creation.

#### NOTES

1 Rodney Clapp reports Calder's story in *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 127-128.

2 David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 77.

3 John DeGraaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publications, Inc., 2001), 13.

4 James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 25.

5 Michael Jessup, "Truth: The First Casualty of Postmodern Consumerism," *The Christian Scholar's Review* 30/3 (Spring 2001), 292.

6 Ibid. See, for instance, Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1972/1981), 38.

7 Twitchell, *Lead Us Into Temptation*, 17-49.

8 Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 110-117.

9 Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 50.

10 Ibid., 71.

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