

NCTM Christies Beach Monday Night Study  
28 April 2008 (Noel Due)  
*Why We Buy Stuff*  
**Ontology, Identity, and the Consumerist Self**

**1. Consumerism: Nothing New Under the Sun?**

(1) Some interesting books make it to the top of the best seller lists!

- E.g. Paco Underhill *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping; The Call of the Mall*.
  - Two amazing things about such books
    - § They are best sellers!
    - § They seek to explain ‘trivial’ behaviour (like shopping) in terms of non-trivial drives.
      - Self esteem
      - Identity
      - Insecurity
      - Control
      - Status
      - Escapism
      - “Hard wired” evolutionary behaviours linked to hunter-gatherer past; display and conquest etc.
  - § If ‘consuming’ is deep, ‘marketing’ (and all that goes with it) is simply therefore opportunistic.

(2) The consumerist West

- The shift from the means of production to the means of consumption.
  - Function gives way to image, style triumphs over substance
    - § Bernays (saucy!) and his followers and imitators
      - *Crystallizing Public Opinion*; Goebbels and propaganda
      - Public relations, spin, and modern politics
        - The irrational herd and the need to control anarchy
- How to collapse the world economy and revising ‘patriotic duty’ post 9/11

(3) Our consumerist ancestors

- The consumerist West: influence through marketing and the exportation of techniques
  - Fertile soils in which things take root
  - The dust of archaeology shows similar fertility!
- Needs and wants: knowing what we need and needing what we do not want?
  - The problem of ‘good’ and ‘evil’.

(4) The depths of the drive: eating and drinking the power of the gods

- E.g. *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a cultural system* (Peggy Reeves Sanday)
  - The title says a lot! Not just lack of protein alternatives
    - § Various cultural examples (from Trobriand Islands; Fiji; Iroquois; Aztec and others) reveal that the ultimate act of human violence may be linked to desire for power, fertility, regeneration of the person consumed (as in mortuary cannibalism); ingestion of the ‘spirit’ of the person; direct access to the ‘gods’ in the feasting and

related actions; and increased status in both societal and spiritual terms.

(5) Is all of this just interesting (assuming that it is!), or does it point beyond itself to the fact that our real needs are far deeper than we realise?

## 2. John 6 and Ontological Consumption

(1) The *context* of the sign and its associated discourse

- The merciful provision of bread in the desert (John 6:1-15) and the grumbling of the ones so mercifully provided for (John 6:15 cf. 25, 30-31, 41, 61, 66)
  - Wilderness echoes of the exodus wanderings and complaining echoes of the exodus murmurings!
    - New exodus motif in many NT passages

(2) The *content* of the discourse, which gives the meaning of the provision of the bread (cf. Deut. 8:3 and Ex. 16:12, where the Old Testament manna was clearly to be a continual sign of the Lord's grace to his rebellious people i.e. it was 'manna with meaning').

- There are *two kinds of food* (John 6:27), and, by implication, *two classes of people*, those who work for the bread which perishes, and those who receive the Bread which does not.
  - The former do not come to Jesus and do not believe on him. The latter do come and they do believe, because the Father has granted it to be so (6:36, 64 cf. 6:37, 39, 44-45, 65)
- The food of eternal life is *granted freely*. This is the whole burden of Jesus' discourse: he has been given for the life of the world. By contrast, the meaning of 6:28 is "tell us what works we have to do and we will do them (especially if we can be well fed every day as we were yesterday!)"
  - Compare with Isaiah 55:1ff. (and also see Ex. 24:11; Is. 25:6ff.; Ps. 23:5; 36:8; Jer. 31:14; Matt. 22:4; Rev. 22:17; etc.).
    - God is always the Feast Giver, not simply in terms of his providential care (e.g. Ps. 104), but in terms of his gracious provision in the victory feast/wedding banquet for his people.
- Jesus identifies himself as *God's true Bread*, given for the life of the world (John 6:33), and this leads to the first of the 'I am' sayings in John. God does not just give bread, but Jesus is God's gift, in himself.
  - 'I am the bread' is a repeated refrain (John 6:35, 41, 48, 51)...there was not lack of opportunity to hear what Jesus was saying!
    - The statement is met by deliberate misunderstanding. John 6:15, 25, 28, 34 all are indicators that the hearers had not risen above the level of 'physical' bread. When Jesus presses beyond this they show stubborn hearts of unbelief (John 6:41f., 52, 60, 66).
    - In view of the stubbornness of heart thus revealed, it becomes plain that the *only way* to come to faith in Christ is by God's own gracious action (6:37, 39, 44-45, 65, 69-70).
- The focus of the miracle is not that it happened, *but who did it*. The sign points to Christ himself as the Bread and the fact that men must come to him, personally.
  - John 6:35, 63-64 define the nature of 'consuming' Jesus

- And who is the Jesus thus consumed?
    - 3x 'Son of Man' 6:27, 53, 62
    - 7x 'descended' 6:33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58
    - 11x 'Father' 6:27, 32, 37, 40, 44, 45, 46, 57, 65
    - Unique claims that therefore follow, e.g. Jesus gives eternal sustenance/life (6:35, 51, 54); he is aware of his pre-existence and thus has unique knowledge of the Father (6:38, 46, 62); and he himself brings resurrection and eternal preservation (6:39, 40, 44, 54).
  - See these things in the context of the purpose of John's Gospel, as in John 20:31.
- (3) The 'consumption' in view is *entirely that of faith* (6:29, 35-39, 47, 64, and 69).
- To 'consume' the Son is to believe in him, i.e. to trust him; to hear his word and receive it; to obey his word by believing it.
    - In particular, Jesus draws attention to the way in which he is the bread of heaven for the life of the world, by referring to the shedding of his blood and death of his body. It is faith in Jesus *as Crucified* as the Lamb of God, the atoning sacrifice, that is saving faith!
- (4) Even more, John 6:57 indicates that this principle of living by the life of another is ontological.
- It is the Father who gives it to Jesus to have 'life in himself' (John 5:26), but the life of Jesus the man is entirely dependent on the Father, as the eternal 'begetting' of the Son is entirely from the Father.

### 3. Implications

(1) *Consumerism taps into deep ontological necessities.* The dynamic at work in idolatry in all its forms is deep beyond measure. This accounts for the power of a consumerist lifestyle on the one hand, and for the fact that it must and will be judged for what it really is (a rejection of the One in whom our life is really found) on the other.

(2) Fallen human nature takes the gifts as a substitute for the Giver, seeking satisfaction in the elements of God's providence, rather than in God himself. This drive must therefore create a substitute world, in which the necessities of faith, hope and love are derived rather than received by grace. *Consumerism gives us a system by which we may work to gain faith, hope and love without recourse to God.*

(3) The life of God is known by God's own grace, received by faith. *All human consumerism in whatever form is an attempt to live without faith, and without reliance on grace.* It is trying to 'eat' and 'drink' without faith. It is trying to be 'filled' by the things that the world and the things of 'sight' provide.

(4) All that humanity works for, which is not of faith, will perish. We should not be surprised that men and women work exceptionally hard in this world, and that this work is linked to the idea of enjoying the just rewards of our hard labour. *Consumerism plays on the idea that hard work is rewarded,* that we are 'worth it', and therefore we should reap the benefits of serving the system...paradoxically by escaping from it! Indeed, 'Paradise' stares back at us from every page of every tourist, makeover, retirement, or investment advertisement.

(5) Apart from faith, all that we work for in this way will perish, and we along with it.