

## **The Consumer Church and Christian Discipleship in Small Groups**

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If there is any sort of defining interest of the modern times it must be economics. The invisible yet heavy hand of the market economy makes itself felt in every aspect of life, this is certainly true of the church in America. Consumerist mentalities affect interpersonal relationships through the imperative of personal preference. The local church is then reduced to catering to individual tastes. This is especially true with regard to discipleship, especially of new believers. The prevailing discipleship structure in churches today is a network of small groups. I argue in this paper that the consumer church fails to adequately disciple its believers in small groups because the content and structure reinforce consumerism; in response churches need to address small group discipleship with an affective Trinitarian ethic of love and engagement.

A defining characteristic of church in America is the lack of a centralized, state religion.<sup>1</sup> People have been able to choose which, if any, church they will attend. In the mid 1800s scholars Baird and Schaff noted that “the ‘facts’ seemed obvious: religious freedoms increased the involvement of people and stimulated religious activity.”<sup>2</sup> Despite these positive traits there was a dark side to American church polity. It soon became evident that not every church was succeeding for “where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, religious organizations must compete for members...”<sup>3</sup> Thus, people are seen as consumers to be wooed, or as commodities to be counted and used, as churches perpetuate themselves by satisfying the needs of their ‘customers’. This is the ‘natural outcome’ of the presumed omnipresent ‘reality’ of the importance of money and attendance to church growth and health.

Consumerism is a real and serious problem plaguing the American church. Paul Louis Metzger asserts that consumerism holds as its highest good, “[...] giving consumers what they want, when they want and at the least cost to consumers

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

themselves.”<sup>4</sup> Most churches will not have the above phrase as their mission statement or on the sanctuary wall but their practices illuminate the true value given to consumerism. Thus, consumerism may not be a developed philosophy or a stated value of churches but, “[...] it is a way of relating to beliefs—a *set of habits of interpretation and use* that renders the ‘content’ of beliefs and values less important. [italics original]”<sup>5</sup> The nature of consumerism is to produce blindness to issues which do not immediately impact its primary mandate of satisfying customers.

Consumerism affects discipleship on several different levels. First, Christians are implicitly taught how to pursue Christianity based on their personal preferences. Many churches in desiring to have successful ministry do not adequately address issues such as suffering, persecution, poverty, and the like. Concern is for what the individual wants shapes prayer, ministry, and small group involvement. Thus, small group involvement is often based on shared affinities as opposed to a shared neighborhood.

Second, consumerism works to reinforce race and class divisions based on personal preference.<sup>6</sup> New believers are often not taught concerning the reconciling work of Jesus Christ between different cultures and classes; nor do they learn the importance of community beyond affinity groups, or how those of lower economic classes and marginalized races can bless and minister to *them*. Not addressing these issues only reinforces social and racial divisions in the church, and in society as a whole.

Third, young Christians are raised in a moralist mindset concerned with acting right to fit the church culture as opposed to submitting to a transformation of the heart by the Holy Spirit, which will produce godly actions out of love for God. A recent convert is more likely to be encouraged to quit smoking than to be challenged toward a greater love for the Savior. This is not to deny that behavior is important, but to affirm that behavior flows out of the heart (Matthew 15:18-19; James 1:14).

The response to issues such as these must be theological because the church practice of consumerism either gives evidence to the presence of theological error or a

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*.

pragmatic betrayal of correct theology. As Darrell Guder writes, “[...] the answer to the crisis of the North American church will not be found at the level of method and problem solving... The real issues are spiritual and theological.”<sup>7</sup> A theological and ethical engagement of consumerist small group discipleship is just what is needed to right a damaged area of church life. Such a model must be grounded in the divine love of the Triune God.

Rather than looking at discipleship as a vehicle for behavior modification or affinity based socialization the best ethical approach is, “...a response to the free grace of God revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup> As believers taken up into the divine life of the Triune God (John 17; Romans 6), we have received the love of God by the Spirit (Romans 5:5), and are free in the law of Christ (Romans 8:2). When a Trinitarian ethic of love is applied to the issues surrounding small group discipleship the problems of consumerism are illumined and specific ethical solutions can be offered.

The first major issue is the perpetuation of the consumerist mentality through small groups. Many churches have bought into this way of thinking by using small groups as a way to market their church as a place which values community. In larger churches small groups may be necessary and can be very positive. I have had some very meaningful experiences in a small group, but when the small group model becomes part of the church’s marketing plan to grow the church and meet needs there are some problems.

Church marketing covers a broad spectrum of practices. At the base level, marketing includes having a sign displaying the name of the church, having the church phone number listed in the phonebook, and other straightforward means of communication. The more specific use of church marketing is that of developing a target audience and then focusing on meeting particular needs. “Successful marketers these days are niche marketers—they target a particular segment of the population, not

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<sup>7</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, "Evangelical Contextualism," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 159.

everyone in general.”<sup>9</sup> A successful small group ministry can quickly become part of a church’s marketing strategy.<sup>10</sup> How is this an issue? Marketing itself is problematic, beyond the rather broad usage of the term for communication, as it seeks to define, “[...] all of the activities that lead up to an exchange of equally valued goods between consenting parties.”<sup>11</sup> What may have originally began as an attempt to foster spiritual growth and community in a church can quickly morph into a beast of a marketing plan concerned with numbers, dollars, and providing ‘services’ for its ‘customers’.

The Trinitarian model presented by Scripture stands in opposition to the consumerist orientation. The ministry of Jesus was not concerned foremost with creating an economically successful ministry or a large network of small groups. Instead, we see him doing the will of the Father in love, engaging life-on-life with the disciples and never compromising his prophetic stance, even in the face of rejection. The concern of the church should not be to grow small group ministries so that the organization will appear successful. Small group ministries are helpful venues where people can express and experience the love of God in Christ in an intimate setting. Instead of thinking of church programs or relationships as goods and services to be rendered, a Trinitarian engagement would put the value squarely on loving the neighbor. Rather than fostering a new generation of consumer Christians, small group ministries could be encouraging these new believers to know the love of God in Christ through the Spirit. When churches get become less concerned about the organization and more concerned with reaching people as a part of God’s movement into the world then profound change will happen!

The second major issue is that of race and class divisions within the churches of America. This relates to small group discipleship quite directly. When churches have a specific target audience defined by race or class, the result is a homogeneous church of race and class. “Homogeneous, small-group breeding grounds nurture small-minded and

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<sup>9</sup> George Barna, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Willow Creek Community Church (in the suburbs of Chicago) is an example of how a successful small group ministry can quickly become part of a church’s marketing strategy. See Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Barna, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing*, 19.

shortsighted attempts to address race and class divisions.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, small-groups compound the issue by being shaped by the marketing strategies of the church and in turn serving to further the divisions. That churches are not racially integrated has been long attested and research has affirmed it. “Neither congregations nor parishes are remotely close to approximating the diversity of wider society...”<sup>13</sup> This issue comes directly out of a consumerist-preference driven mentality which avoids the difficulty of interacting with other cultures and classes.

At Willow Creek Community Church the small group movement was conceived out of a perceived need for greater community.<sup>14</sup> However, one must question whether a church that was marketed as being homogeneous in race and class was able to achieve “community” by simply breaking it up into small pieces. No doubt the members in the church are able to connect at a deeper level, but this community lacks racial and economic diversity. This is not just a problem with Willow Creek but with many other churches. Because of the pervasiveness of the consumer culture it is most convenient for churchgoers to attend a church that caters to their kind of people. “It is the nature of this focus of social energy that congregations are relatively homogeneous and particularistic.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, churches and church members need to be intentional about addressing authentic community that interacts with those of other ethnicities and economic backgrounds.

A Trinitarian ethic of love stands in condemnation of such mentalities and practices. As followers of Jesus Christ united in the same Body it is wrong for churches to divide so clearly along these lines. God himself in Christ bridged the greatest cultural and economic gap and Jesus did not ‘lord it over us’ but gave himself freely unto death that we might be saved. As Christians united to this same God, how can we not desire to be in relationship and communion with our brothers and sisters who are of a different

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<sup>12</sup> Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin D. Dougherty, "How Monochromatic Is Church Membership? Racial-Ethnic Diversity in Religious Community," *Sociology of Religion* 64.1: 82.

<sup>14</sup> Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, et al., *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1997), 355.

ethnicity, or socio-economic group? As members of one Body, we need each other and we need to bless the other out of the riches we have in Christ.

Small groups can foster this by seeking to engage the world across ethnic and economic boundaries. Rather than just ministering to the poor, a truly cross-cultural and costly experience would be to minister *with* the poor.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the discipleship of new believers needs to address issues of race and class because Scripture so strongly teaches concerning the poor and unity in Jesus Christ. Such an orientation is reminiscent of Philippians 2:1-11, where Jesus humbled himself and came down to Earth and died a criminal's death. Moreover, the small group can engage in the missional work of the Triune God as a sent community. So we should not hesitate to see the value of each person, holding each person in high esteem as we seek to minister to him or her as a servant recognizing that as we do the individual ministers to us in turn.

Finally, small groups tend to affect discipleship along non-affective lines that emphasize moralism or some sort of conformity to the consumerist lifestyle. It is already attested that small groups easily become homogeneous and consumerist, and these facts seem to be associated with the eventual result that transformative discipleship does not necessarily happen. Small groups tend to foster a kind of 'churchianity', which is essentially moralism bound up with conforming to the homogeneous church culture. "In small groups that meet over long periods of time, the subtle pressures to conform to such norms [personal experience as authoritative, distrust of leadership, and a focus on self-esteem] are especially strong."<sup>17</sup> As opposed to seeking to know the Bible deeply or to submit themselves to the conviction of the Word, many small groups are focused on providing support for each other by helping one another feel better about their lives. There is definitely a place for support, both for 12 step groups and for more generic small groups whose focus is on prayer and encouragement. However, the end goal of discipleship is never to feel better about one's self, but rather to become conformed to the image of Jesus by knowing the Love of God in Christ as communicated by the Spirit.

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<sup>16</sup> Metzger, *Consuming Jesus*, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Wuthnow, "The Small-Group Movement in the Context of American Religion," in *"I Come Away Stronger" How Small Groups are Shaping American Religion*, Robert Wuthnow, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 358-9.

A vital small group which comes together to study the Word of God, to pray, to serve and to encourage one another to “love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10.24) is a powerful tool in the hands of the Lord to work heart transformation. The focus needs to always be on allowing the heart to be drawn closer to the Lord by the Spirit as we experience the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit. One practical way is to love one another. To give sacrificially of one’s life is both to communicate and to experience the love of God in Christ. Furthermore, encouraging one another to read the Word of God is crucial as in it the love of God is revealed to us. It is important to avoid the moralistic trap of measuring spirituality in minutes or hours of “quiet time” but rather to communicate with each other what the Lord has been teaching. As members in a small group love one another and seek to serve others lovingly, they live out discipleship and communicate to new believers that they do not buy into the consumer culture.

American consumerism has had a tremendous impact on how the church does discipleship in small groups: from a consumerist mentality of personal preference, to homogeneous churches, to the moralism of ‘churchianity’ based on homogeneous values, consumerism has played a pernicious and surprisingly invisible role. The Trinitarian ethic of the love of God in Christ opposes the fallen powers and principalities of the world, such as consumerism. This ethical model engages both God and the world in a missional and relational dynamic that works directly on the heart. When the heart is captured by the love of God in Christ, the consumerist desires of the heart are displaced, though the struggle to be captured by Christ and not consumerism will be a daily one.

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