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The Sacraments and Consumer Culture (Book Review)

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In this excellent study, Timothy M. Brunk, Associate Professor of Systematic/Constructive Theology and Practical Theology at Villanova University, continues a conversation that has been bubbling for a bit over a century.¹ What is known as the liturgical renewal—in tandem with broader church renewal promoted by the biblical, patristic, and ecumenical developments—had its origins in the early 20th century, about 50 years before Vatican II.

In reviewing this book, I will first sketch the recent history of the conversation about worship and culture, to give us a better context for appreciating what Brunk has written. Then I will summarize his arguments about baptism and Eucharist as they are impacted by consumerism, interacting with them from my own perspective, and briefly note his section on confirmation. Along the way, I will make suggestions as to how people in the Reformed tradition might learn from Brunk and others in the Roman Catholic tradition. But first, the background conversation.

Sacrosanctum Concilium

Of particular interest for us is the Vatican Council's 1963 Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and its teaching on worship and culture. In one section, SC dealt with norms for adapting the liturgy to the culture and traditions of the many peoples throughout the world, balancing the needs for unity of doctrine and the church with a variety of local languages and cultures. This opened the way for better participation and nurturing of God's people, but also for an extended discussion about just how to do it; a lot of push and pull still continues.

Harvie Conn and Contextualization

After 10 years of service as a missionary in Korea, Harvie Conn (1933-99) joined the faculty of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, teaching apologetics and missions. It was when he attended the Consultation on Gospel and Culture,

the Willowbank Meeting (1978), that his questions about the gospel and culture that had been brewing for years began to find answers. His masterwork grew out of this meeting and subsequent discussions among missiologists: *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (1984). Of particular interest for us is his conclusion that all theology is cross-cultural in character and therefore dialogical. This has implications for the relationship of culture to liturgy/worship: cultural and social contexts influence how we see the world and read/hear Scripture and respond to it in worship.

The Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture

In the 1990s, the Lutheran World Fellowship held three consultations on worship and culture. The cultural background of their mission work in the developing world, especially Africa, had, of course, been European and American. And so, worship in the resulting churches was often Western in culture. They realized that the local indigenous cultures had been bypassed or suppressed. Worship needed to be recontextualized using the gifts of the local cultures. One result of their consultations was the Nairobi statement, formulated in 1996. We can look at contextualization of worship/liturgy under four dynamics, according to the Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture:

- *transcultural* aspects, the *ordo* and the parts/elements;
- *contextual* elements, patterns of speech, dress, etc., that situate and particularize the universal in the local setting;
- *counter-cultural*, resistance to and rejection of things which obscure and contradict the gospel;
- *cross-cultural*, indicators of the body of Christ from other cultures and times that can be shared to enrich worship.

Graham Hughes and Late Modernity

In *Worship as Meaning* (Cambridge, 2003),

Hughes, from Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia, discusses the struggles worshipers experience as they live in late modernity with its secular assumptions and then come to worship with its entirely contradictory gospel story. This would be a case of counter-cultural resistance, listed in the Nairobi statement, with the worshiper caught in the middle. In Brunk's book, the things which obscure and contradict the gospel have to do with consumerism, calling for counter-cultural clarity and resistance.

Charles Taylor and Social Imagineries

In *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard, 1989), Charles Taylor traces the development of "disenchantment" that has allowed the human agent to define the good life by oneself, divorced from an overarching cosmic order. The result is that 21st-century worshipers live within a narrative that has "sunk to the level of a picture in Wittgenstein's sense; that is, it becomes part of the unquestioned background [unchallenged common sense] which conditions the way we think.... From within the picture it seems obvious" (Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard, 2007, 565).

In Brunk's project, the background picture is consumerism, an unquestioned and hidden way of seeing the world, even when one is not literally purchasing anything. For instance, relationships become transactional, or the sacraments become commodities instead of gifts of grace.

Jamie Smith and Cultural Liturgies

As he begins *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith invites us to visit a suburban cathedral, lingering over details to make sure we really *see* it.² With Smith as our guide, we start in the vast parking lot filled with the worshipers' cars and are greeted there by the driver of a tram that carries us to one of the entrances. We pause as we enter. The cathedral is vast, giving the sense of transcendence and benign presence of the local god. The space is decorated with icons of the saints, telling us that we have come to the place of blessing and salvation. As we slowly make our way, stopping to gaze closely at each icon, contemplating memories of previous visits, we are gathered into the sacred atmosphere of the temple.

The icons also orient us to a coming festival,

inviting us to anticipate the celebration and offering objects for the celebration. A labyrinth guides us along the way past the many side chapels of the cathedral, each dedicated to one of the saints. As we gaze at the rich, three-dimensional iconography that adorns the walls and interior of the chapels, we are shown visions of "the good life." We are encouraged to imitate these saints, become clothed as they are. Several acolytes are available to help us select appropriate adornment. We proceed to a chapel altar, make our donation, and receive in exchange something concrete that will identify us as a devotee.

Yes, the cathedral is a mall with its liturgies that shape and promise fulfillment of our desires. Smith makes the point that both secular liturgies and Christian liturgies speak to the heart rather than the head, molding the desires and imaginations of the participants. Desires are prior to thinking a worldview, imagining the world within a social setting and with others. Or, as Joshua Rothman put it, "Advertisers sell us things by getting us to imagine better versions of ourselves."³

The Sacraments and Consumer Culture

Within the larger context of worship and culture sketched above, what Brunk does is zero in on the sacraments, set in the context of the whole Christian liturgy. In Brunk's Roman Catholic tradition, there are seven sacraments. In this review we will concentrate on Baptism and Eucharist/Lord's Supper because they are shared with the larger Christian world.

Individualism

This brings us to Brunk's first aspect of consumerism, the individual abstracted from society. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, up until the Renaissance leading into modernity, the individual was assumed to be embedded in society, as society was embedded in the creation and the creation in God. Although you can find examples of medieval individuals who went their own way in rejecting community behavioral practices, even as far as atheism, one had to work at this. It was hard to cut oneself loose; it had to be deliberate. As a result of a new secularism that developed during the Enlightenment, one that dis-embedded the indi-

vidual, the default assumption, or social imaginary, became atheism; and one then had to be very deliberate about belief and adherence to a traditional biblical ethic. For most, religion becomes one of many hobbies, the source of feel-good, human-interest stories in the news.

This gives us “a strange configuration of sociality,” as Jamie Smith puts it, governed by the vision of the good life promoted by mass advertising.⁴ One now assesses oneself and others in a competition to be youthful, beautiful, and tasteful (the icons of the saints in the mall chapels), and of course, up to date—“What’s your i-phone model number?” As we shall see, Brunk finds that this form of individualism weakens and distorts the practice of the sacraments.

Commodification

Early in the book, Brunk outlines his definition of the second aspect of consumerism—commodification:

Ignorance of the contexts under which consumer goods are produced is a basic feature of late-modern society, at times perhaps verging on deliberate indifference to those contexts. When one becomes accustomed to the abstraction of products from the people and places that produced them, one becomes accustomed to living in a world of brute things with very little by way of social meaning or significance. (1–2)

The key words here are *context* and *abstraction*. A commodity appears on the supermarket shelves shorn of the place from which it came—Brunk quotes Vincent Miller about eating “beans from nowhere” (xiv)—even when the label says, in fine print, “Peru” or “China.” One might imagine a Peruvian laborer stooping to pick blueberries, even the hillside where they grew; or a Chinese worker at a machine that makes plastic containers, but most days that is not likely. And all the transport workers are out of sight. You’re more likely to focus on the logo on the package, making sure you’ve chosen one to show your wokeness. Brunk quotes Tom Beaudoin on the last point: “The logo must suggest a certain ethos but not remind the customer that someone, somewhere actually makes the products that bear the logo.”⁵ Shopping is all about building your own brand. Brunk’s project is to discover how the experience of

repeated individualized consumption divorced from context affects the practice of the sacraments and thus the formation of Christians. To take confirmation as one example, it could be said to correspond to the Reformed practice of public profession of faith leading to becoming a communicant at the Lord’s Supper. There are obvious differences, of course. The Reformed do not consider that it is a sacrament, but it is often treated as a very important day in the life of a youth, whether late pre-adolescent or teen-ager, admission at last to the Supper. And there are appropriate ceremonies during the morning worship service. This is not the place to discuss the theological differences between Roman Catholic and Reformed understandings; that’s for another time and place. But, let us see what we can learn from Brunk’s discussion of consumerism’s impact on this transitional day.

Among his concerns is the consumer emphasis on personal choice—this is the day where I declare my choice to follow Jesus—and on rewards—I have learned my catechism, and now I get to eat. To remind us, Brunk again summarizes consumerism:

[C]onsumerism involves the commodification of goods. That is, the isolation of goods from their native contexts of meaning and production, repackaging and rebranding those goods to appeal to consumers, and an idealized sense of the ease with which those goods are to be enjoyed. This consumerist decontextualization goes hand-in-hand with a kind of social fragmentation...“where individuals ‘construct meaning’ on their own, looking only for a type of social confirmation from a group.” (42–3, quoting from Timothy Gabrielli)

He then goes on to explore how consumerism can intrude and distort this moment in the life of a young person. Because of the constant barrage of advertising and cell-phone imaging (or those saintly icons at the mall), the confirmand can treat this as one more choice as I continue to invent myself. Time to move on and make the next choice. The catechetical process leading to confirmation also can become a challenge surmounted by my efforts and diligence, adding one more quality to my identity. I have now arrived at a new plateau; I’m more grown up, and my family or my friends know it!

Among the Reformed, this step is known as

public profession of faith, acknowledging a certain level of doctrinal understanding and consistent holiness. However, this can now be seen more as a personal choice, an act that makes one more complete—the influence of cell phones and the malls—than as a celebration of what God is doing, of God’s grace. This emphasis on personal choice is sometimes reinforced by the Arminian cast given by some Evangelicals to the decision to “follow Jesus”—the idea that I’m making this one on my own rather than acknowledging that God by grace has brought me thus far. Now, let’s turn to baptism and the meal.

Baptism

In his chapter on baptism, Brunk asks, “In what ways might we understand baptism as a religious practice subject to abstraction from the religious context in which it is properly located?” (2) Indeed, for baptism seems to resonate with a religious context. Where else would you find it? Could it ever be a mere logo, a brand? For one thing, he suggests that baptism runs the risk of “directing attention to sentimentality and away from what is quite literally a life-and-death event... rooted in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth” (7). He points us to Romans 6, where Christians are said to be baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that we might die to sin and rise to newness of life. That cute little baby all dressed up in her finest has just died...and risen! If she had been plunged naked into the water of a large font and of course retrieved gasping for breath, the truth of Romans 6 would be more evident.⁶ That can be lost in the midst of the expenditure of \$625 for a baptismal gown⁷ and who knows how much for the family party that afternoon.

To resist this commodification of sentimentalism, Brunk turns our attention to the “context of production”: the events, or God’s work that gives us baptism. He calls this “the paschal mystery: what God effects through... the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus...[:] reconciliation of God and human” (7). This is what provides the dynamic for Romans 6: union with Christ in his death and rising.

Brunk urges us to see that bringing the paschal mystery out of the shadows through a robust catechetical program yields three results: it is a pub-

lic affair, it involves almsgiving, and the church is encouraged by the witness of the catechumens. As baptism becomes a part of the public assembly’s life—instead of being a private, family ceremony (think: each person watching his own TV or phone in his private space)—preparation for baptism also becomes public. Candidates are identified in the assembly, and the steps along the way are noted publicly, supported in the prayers of the people.

In the ancient church, catechumens were expected to give alms. Almsgiving was a prominent part of the liturgy and life of the assembly. Today, this could take the form of monetary gifts, but also volunteering to help run a food bank or a job-training program for the poor. It becomes part of the transformation of life practices in a consumer society.

The church also benefits from supporting the catechumens and their sponsors through prayers and concrete actions of encouragement. As the candidates witness to their faith, the church receives this witness and is in turn encouraged. The bond that develops through the process strengthens and builds up the body of Christ.

Reading Brunk with Reformed eyes leads me to see not just the possibility of sentimentalism obscuring the true setting of baptism, but the actuality of commodification of cuteness in the Reformed world. Think back over the last few years of baptisms in your church. What did that infant wear? How much did cuteness obscure the death and life connection to Christ’s passion? What public preparations were there for the baptisms; how much was the whole congregation involved?

Eucharist

In Chapter 29, Brunk discusses the challenges posed to the meal by consumerism in terms of three pairs: individualism and community, passivity and participation, and commodification and gift. With each pair, he seeks to show how consumerism (individualism, passivity, and commodification) interferes with the meal’s nature as community, participation, and gift.

Individualism and Community

Noting the way contemporary Christians are immersed in advertising and the mall, Brunk

quotes Michael Warren: “One may eventually approach worship or catechesis as a commercial product, evaluated by where it does or does not satisfy, that is enlarge the self or comfort the self” (65). Brunk illustrates this dilemma by visiting the eating habits of those same Christians; he shows that family meals have been eroded by the same pressures. Since the sign function of the Eucharist is partly drawn from ordinary meals, the fractured family meal tends to weaken the sense that the Holy Supper is a communal event. Many families, scattering during breakfast and eating alone for lunch, do not even have a common evening meal together. This is true whether the family is prosperous or poor, although the meager meal of the poor may often be more shared and communal; affluence breeds distraction from community. He contrasts this experience with that of the extended family preparing and eating the Thanksgiving dinner: hours together, much conversation, and, of course, the food savored leisurely. This image should transfer in the symbols of bread and wine shared with conversation (the words of the liturgy) and in the leisure of an hour or so each week.

No matter what Christian denomination, this is a shared problem. Brunk points out that “the work of celebrating the Eucharist fruitfully... requires the work of building and maintaining community, and vice versa” (67). Those gathered around the Holy Table, no matter their conscious motivations and often a motley group, have been gathered by God. The meal will help them to see one another as members of Christ; but working from the other end, every effort to be a community—work days, the coffee hour, food cupboard teams, choir, many others—will support the communal nature of the meal.

Passivity and Participation

Brunk points out that one of the things that hinders participation is that the elements, the bread and the wine, are—like the beans from nowhere in the supermarket—abstracted from their source. The congregation has little or no idea where they came from, how they were prepared; they simply appear. It is a struggle to connect them with life, especially if wafers are used instead of real bread, and therefore to connect the whole liturgy to the rest

of life. How does one live out the call to sacrificial living? The early church custom of families making the bread and wine and then bringing them, in turn, to the assembly for the meal prevented this abstraction and emphasized the gift nature of the meal. They also brought more than enough, so that the surplus could be taken from the liturgy to the poor. In some congregations across many denominations today, this custom is being resurrected; families take turns baking the bread, and perhaps someone in the congregation is an amateur vintner. And the basket of food for the hungry is brought forward at the time of the offering.

Also, because so much time is spent during the week passively watching sports or drama on TV or devices, the drama of the liturgy is also merely watched and not entered into fully. During Covid, when services have been streamed or you-tubed, passivity may have been reinforced. One friend remarked to me that he felt like a spectator in need of a bag of popcorn and not a worshiper. Recovery may take time.

Reformed worship has sometimes been criticized for being passive: the people sit in the pews while the pastor reads the lesson(s), voices the prayers, preaches the sermon. The people get to say “amen” and sing hymns. How can more participation by the people happen? In some churches, lay readers read the lessons and lead the prayers; but the meal is passive (and infrequent), served to the people as they sit in the pews.

Calvin University’s chapel has a large communion table with a number of seats at it. Once, I was there for a Sunday service of a local Christian Reformed Church that rented the facility. We came forward to the table in groups of maybe a dozen to eat and drink together. As a result, we were more active, more communal, more participative; it was profound.⁸

Commodification and Gift.

Brunk writes, “The Eucharist is a gift, not a commodity” (77). He calls to mind once more the beans from nowhere; the supermarket doesn’t care what you do with the beans, as long as you just keep buying them. A gift, say a crystal vase from a friend, is something else; the friend does care what you do with it because “the giver and the recipient

are implicated in a relationship where intentions and actions matter” (77). My modest pottery collection, purchased from potters and shops over the years, contains several pieces that were gifts. A gift implies self-giving, not just transfer of the object. Like a greeting, it’s not part of a contract of exchange, but the offer of self in friendship. The bread and wine are the offer of God’s love, caring, and friendship. Or, as Calvin would put it, they convey that friendship. Indeed, “we are truly made partakers of the real substance of the body and blood of the Lord.”⁹ Brunk writes, “The Eucharist is not a brute thing, but the very subjectivity of the Risen Lord. It calls for a response” (79).

That response concerns “how Christians use the material of this world.” (79) Brunk quotes Mark Searle: “Creation, groaning to be redeemed from the homicidal perversions to which our sinful use has subjected it, finds its liberation when it is used as it is used in the liturgy.”¹⁰ That is, as a gift to be nurtured and protected (Gen 2:15). Also, the bond of the shared gift implies the mutual care of those who eat at the Lord’s Table.

Conclusions

Following on from the conversation on worship and culture that we summarized above, Brunk has focused on one cultural issue: consumerism and its threat to worship and the Christian life, drawing at times on Jamie Smith and his Cultural Liturgies project, a trilogy of works: *Desiring the Kingdom*, *Imagining the Kingdom*, and *Awaiting the King* (Baker Academic, 2009, 2013), 1017. Brunk’s book is more narrowly focused, which gives us a specific tool for strengthening the practice of the sacraments.

As we have found, despite age-old differences between Catholics and Calvinists about the sacraments, there are points of convergence and wisdom we can learn from Brunk’s project. He alerts those of us in the Reformed world to ways consumerism weakens our own celebrations of the bath and the meal. He opens up several possibilities for resisting the mall or internet economy, whose signs undermine that “strange configuration of sociality.” There is much more to ponder in this book, and there are more details to flesh out, but perhaps this is enough to entice you to pick it up and read.

Endnotes

1. Full disclosure: Brunk mentions presenting parts of this book to the “Delaware Valley contingent of the North American Academy of Liturgy” (ix). I am a member of that contingent and enjoyed the presentations and conversations; and I am pleased to see all the pieces together in happy concert.
2. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 19–22.
3. Joshua Rothman; “In Another Life” *The New Yorker*, December 21, 2020, 71
4. Smith, *Desiring*, 96,98; quoted in Brunk on page xii.
5. Brunk, 3, quoting Tom Beauduin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 69.
6. For comparison, see these pictures: https://www.google.com/search?q=russian+orthodox+baptism&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=JylDaTXsaMg4ZM%252ChKmFvLT1QZ_1fM%252C_&vet=1&usq=AI4_-kRlldTMc6BfL3gp9YB23ULkLi7-shA&sas=X&ved=2ahUKewiioaSwMzxAhUFXc0KHXKeANkQ_h0wAXoECA8QBQ&biw=1349&bih=608#imgsrc=W7yIR0JUiZlBvM
7. It’s possible; read ’em and weep. <https://www.onesmallchild.com/products/royal-christening-gown>
8. See these perceptive comments by Mark A. Torgerson, on architecture and fuller, communal Eucharistic participation: <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/how-church-architecture-affects-lord-s-supper-practices/>
9. John Calvin, *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord and only Saviour Jesus Christ*, in J.K.S. Reid, Calvin: Theological Treatises, LCC 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 166.
10. Mark Searle, “Serving the Lord with Justice” in *Vision: The Scholarly Contributions of Mark Searle to Liturgical Renewal*, ed. Anne Koester and Barbara Searle (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 15-16.