

Consumerism

Is choice the highest good?

Consumerism is the worldview that teaches us that meaning and identity are to be found through what we consume: the products we buy, the brands we adopt and the media we view, amongst other things. Choice is fundamental to consumerism, because the greater choice we have the more able we are to tailor our consumption to our personal desires. Through choice and consumption, we are told that we can express ourselves and be whoever we want to be.

'If individualization creates the structure of society, then consumerism provides its navigation mechanism or satellite navigation mechanism. Individuals navigate a multi-choice world by being consumers.'
– Graham Cray, *Disciples and Citizens*

Like choice, change is also essential to consumerism, and therefore so is dissatisfaction. If we are satisfied, we need no longer make new choices. Consumerism encourages us to choose, use up, discard and choose again.

In the absence of other ways to find our place in the world, consumerism is the chief means by which our culture searches for identity and meaning. What does the Bible have to say about this?



Thinking Biblically About...

What's the problem?

It is easy to assume that consumerism is only about the things we buy – the clothes, electronic gadgets, music, cars, coffee and other branded goods that we see advertised, and that each claim to make a statement about the kind of people we are. But although these things are consumerism's most outward and visible sign, it is about far more than materialism, or a love of physical possessions.

Consumerism encourages choice and change, not just in the brands and products we buy but in every area of life. We learn that if we become dissatisfied or something apparently better is available, it is our right to switch. The decision may be trivial in some cases; if we don't like what is on the TV we can change the channel, or if we don't like the way one coffee shop makes our latte we can go to another one.

But consumerism encourages this behaviour at a far more profound level. We take the same approach towards

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our relationships, our beliefs and our lifestyles as well as our purchases. Everything is reorganised to suit our desires (which can, in turn, be manipulated by advertisers and the media). If a relationship isn't working, we can end it and start a new one. If we don't agree with a particular verse or teaching in the Bible, we can ignore it and focus on the parts we do like. We shape the world around us in our own image, for our own ends.



Unlimited freedom?

Our culture views unlimited choice as the freedom to define ourselves in whatever way we see fit. However, the choices we make have implications – both for ourselves and for other people. We do not always recognise these implications, because

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consumerism fosters a me-centred view of the world; when *my* freedom is the highest good, I may not see how my choices impact those around me. We see only one end of the process: the part that is of most interest to us.

In reality, our access to choice always involves another side to it. Our ‘freedom’ to choose generally comes at the price of another freedom. For example, the wide choice of products we enjoy at low prices may depend on badly-paid and poorly-treated workers to produce them. Our freedom to shop any day of the week means that others may not have the freedom to take a day off whilst their friends and families are also off school and

work. Similarly, the choices we have often come at the expense of the environment, since so much of what we buy consumes natural resources at an unsustainable rate. Consumer lifestyles generate enormous amounts of waste in packaging, unwanted products and discarded items.

At the level of our relationships – whether that means relationships with each other or with God – choice and change inevitably bring instability. There may be circumstances under which a relationship of one kind or another needs to end. However, consumerism encourages us to seek change and new relationships as a *first* response, not as a final solution to a problem that cannot be resolved another way.

Consumerism teaches us to treat our relationships as disposable, like everything else. Once we become bored or disillusioned, or if something better comes along, we are encouraged to discard the old relationship and start again. Choice and the change that it inevitably brings with it is the enemy of love, commitment, and faithfulness.

Q: In what areas of life is choice a good thing? At what point does it become problematic?

What does the Bible say?

As the quote on the front cover suggests, consumerism is our culture's response to a relatively recent problem. Our lives and our society are fragmented. We lack the support of the extended family that we once took for granted. We move away from our home towns for work and university, with careers that require we relocate every few years, and the communities that once would have been relatively stable are subject to constant churn. Families are impacted by high levels of relationship breakdown, which further disperse them. Society is atomised – becoming a collection of individuals rather than a network of smaller communities. Without these roots and relationships, consumerism becomes the way that we establish our identities and understand our place in the world.

This individualism is not all bad. The Bible affirms the dignity of the person and the importance of the individual's relationship with God – though of course, the Bible is also interested in the quality of the relationships we have with each other. Paul makes it clear that our relationship with God is more

important than any group identity or affiliation.



'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

(Galatians 3:28)

However, consumerism places an *undue* emphasis on the self. Individualism encourages us to view ourselves as completely autonomous, the centre of our own unique worlds. We are sovereign over our own lives, and the choices we take affirm this autonomy. Consumerism reinforces the belief that we are our own ultimate sources of authority. This presents a challenge to God's authority, which the Bible calls idolatry.



'You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.'

(Deuteronomy 5:7-9)

Q: Where does the freedom to choose conflict with our faith?



Contentment vs change

Consumerism relies on change. It fosters dissatisfaction, encouraging us to discard old products, relationships and ideas in favour of new ones.



'You shall not covet your neighbour's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbour's house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.'

(Deuteronomy 5:21)

Coveting is the spiritual root of consumerism. Our *desire* for something new is more powerful than our attachment to the new thing itself – which will itself be used up and replaced in due course.



'I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.'

(Philippians 4:12-13)



'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.'

(Luke 12:15)






Paul teaches that contentment is key to a healthy Christian life. Dissatisfaction with our current circumstances encourages envy and temptation, leading us to chase new belongings, experiences, relationships and lifestyles. It prevents us from feeling gratitude and thanking God for the blessings he has given us.



'But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.'

(1 Timothy 6:6-10)

Two worldviews

	Consumer culture	Bible
 Focus of your life	Yourself	God
 Highest good	Choice and change	Faithfulness and love
 Freedom	Freedom to choose your lifestyle and relationships	Freedom from slavery of sin
 Relationships	Useful so long as they serve you	Source of mutual support and sacrifice
 Material possessions	Identity and self-esteem	To steward and bless others

Consumer identity

Lastly, consumerism promises freedom by telling us we can express ourselves by the choices we make. In the consumer culture, identity is fluid. We are told we can be whoever we want to be: a new image or lifestyle is only the next purchase or decision away.

‘The only freedom I care about is the freedom to do right; the freedom to do wrong I am ready to part with on the cheapest terms to anyone who will take it of me.’ – Thomas Huxley

‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.’
(Galatians 5:1)

The Bible also talks about freedom. Consumerism promises us ‘freedom to’ choose and define ourselves as we see fit. In the Bible, freedom is expressed as ‘freedom from’ the slavery of sin.

Our freedoms to choose whatever options and lifestyles we want has a serious impact on our faith.

We may treat our faith in the same way that we treat other commodities, to serve our own purposes and to be used and tailored according to our needs. If a church does not do its worship in the way we are used to; if we do not like the sermons; if there is the wrong mixture of ages and backgrounds; if the service is at the wrong time – we can find another one that does suit us. Like everything else, consumer faith is ‘me shaped’.

Consumerism and the Bible

The same goes for our approach towards the Bible. There are many teachings that are difficult and that Christians over the ages have struggled to understand, accept or put into practice. Consumerism teaches us that this doesn’t matter: if we encounter a teaching we don’t like, we can leave it to one side, just as we would change the channel or brand of coffee if we didn’t like it. Even if we accept a principle in theory, we might still ignore it in practice if it is inconvenient to us.

Rather than challenging us and shaping our behaviour, a consumer-driven faith is one that fits around what we already want to believe.



Where do we go from here?

Consumerism presents a number of challenges to Christians. By encouraging us to discard the possessions, habits, lifestyles and relationships that don't suit us any more in favour of new ones, it undermines our faith on many different levels.

Simplicity

Instead of focusing on possessions and outward appearance, Christianity teaches us that we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), and have a new identity in Christ.



'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.'

(Colossians 3:1-3)

This might entail living a deliberately more simple lifestyle. The Bible teaches that the created world is good and that we are free to enjoy material things, but if this gets in the way of our relationship with God then we should forego unnecessary purchases.

Faithfulness

Consumerism encourages us to treat relationships of all kinds as temporary: there for as long as we want them and so long as they benefit us, but to be discarded once they outlive their usefulness.

We are made in God's image, and one of God's core characteristics is faithfulness or Covenant love. God does not treat us the way that we treat our relationship with him, or our relationships with each other. Maintaining stability and faithfulness in our relationships is a right response to the faithfulness he has shown us – and there are rich benefits for us in forming long-lasting relationships of all kinds, whether friendships, marriage, work relationships or others.

Community

This extends to our local and Christian communities. The constant change involved in consumerism damages these communities as people fall out of relationship, move on or move away. It is extremely challenging to address these tendencies, but once again forming stable communities based on faithful relationships is a right response to God's love.

Q: In what ways can you reduce the impact of consumerism on your life and faith?

What does the **Bible** have to say about **Consumerism**?



- Consumerism teaches us that choice and change are the ultimate good, the way we can express ourselves and be whoever we want to be.
- This extends not only to the things we buy but to our habits, lifestyles, relationships and even our faith itself: we are told we can choose what we want and discard the rest.
- The Bible teaches that our identity is in Christ and that faithfulness in our relationships is a right response to God's faithfulness to us.

Thinking Biblically About... is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government is.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth.

The Jubilee Centre is a Christian social reform charity based in Cambridge, UK. We are convinced that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Find out more at www.jubilee-centre.org/consumerism