

## Boycotts

-J. Wilbur

Every week it seems that there is some new thing or company that Christians are being encouraged to boycott: Disney products; Teletubbies; AT&T; Procter & Gamble; etc. Will the world be turned to Christ even if *every* believer stops watching Disney movies or buying Disney products? Impossible! Maybe those who encourage these public boycotts do not have such grandiose intentions, believing that boycotts will “save” the world. Perhaps they encourage boycotts for the benefit of the saints: that “their minds might not be poisoned through the reasoning of the world.” This would be a very good motive. But, if this is the case, it is rather difficult to see, for example, how paying a fee to AT&T for the use of their telephone lines will negatively affect one's faith in Christ.

Certainly, there are many other reasons that well-meaning believers claim for supporting such public boycotts other than those mentioned. Outwardly, many of these reasons seem to be very righteous; they appeal to the Christian's strong sense of morality. No true Christian is in support of humanism, or homosexuality, or the “new age movement.” They are positively against such things. Regardless, the real question here is not about the righteous desires of the born-again community; it is whether or not these public boycotts are within God's will, that is, whether or not they are scriptural.

Public boycotts not only serve to distract believers from the One who died for them, but they feed fleshly pride: “Look what *I'm doing* for God.” That is not to say that those who get caught up in this sort of thing do not have genuine faith and a genuine love for the Lord Jesus Christ. There is little doubt that the vast majority of men and women involved in boycotts truly believe that they are obeying the Lord in the public stand they have taken. But though such activity does not mean that they do not love the Lord, it strongly suggests that they do not have a firm understanding of just what *is pleasing* to Him. John 14:23 records the Lord Jesus saying, “If a man love me, he will keep my words...” The Lord said, “*my words*,” not popular Christian opinion or what *seems* best. And His words are found no where but in God's Word.

So, what does God's Word have to say about believers boycotting products? The principle is found in 1 Corinthians 10:25-33: “*Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake...*” (10:25 NKJV); “*If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake*” (10:27 NKJV). In ancient Greece, as in many eastern cultures to this day, animals were sacrificed to pagan gods on pagan altars before the meat was brought to the market for sale. The Lord encourages the believer through the apostle Paul to eat the meat without asking questions to find out from where the meat came. The fact that the meat at one time was a part of an idolatrous ritual does not matter. It has been removed from that context and is no longer associated with the unrighteousness of that pagan ritual. The believer is free to eat.

The passage goes on to say, however, “*But if anyone says to you, 'This was offered to idols,' do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you...,*” (10:28 NKJV); there is now a legitimate reason to boycott. When the person serving the meat offers information about the meat's origin on the pagan altar, then there is a reason to refuse it, but for his sake, not the believer's (see 1 Cor 10:28-31). In the market place, the meat is

removed from the context of the pagan altar; it is no longer connected to that altar. There was therefore no reason not to eat it. At a social feast (perhaps even taking place within the walls of a pagan temple), the situation is the same. The Christian is free to eat unless that meat is once again connected to the pagan altar by what the host of the feast has to say about it.

A modern example might be a company run by unbelievers which provides its homosexual employees with special benefits like a married couple might receive. The fact that the company gives such benefits is in and of itself not a reason to boycott that company's products or services. But, when that company uses as an advertising strategy the fact that they give such benefits saying, "Buy our product. You'll be helping our progressive company support gay rights," there may be good reason for an individual to boycott for testimony sake.

Most public boycotts today stem not solely from a desire to see righteousness, but from a desire to bring judgment on the world, which is in direct disobedience to Scripture. When believers band together searching for unrighteousness in the world, is it a surprise that they find it? If an ancient believer traced backwards how his meat got to the market, he would no doubt have found that it had come off of a pagan altar. This would not have been a surprise to him. How ridiculous it would be had he then advertised his "findings" and promoted a boycott of meat. It is not the business of the church to seek out unrighteousness in the world. And it is not the business of the Church to judge the world when evil is uncovered; "... *them that are without, GOD judgeth*" (1 Cor 5:13).

By attempting to bring economic judgment on the world through boycotts, the Church is stepping out of its role and into God's role. This is a clear contradiction to Christ's words. At the same time, there is nothing wrong with an individual Christian boycotting something as a result of tugs from his own conscience. Sin results when the individual's boycott becomes a public crusade. And to further confuse matters, as many individuals and local churches are investing time and effort in futile, disobedient attempts to bring premature judgment on the world, they are often disobedient in another area: in *not* judging the church (1 Cor 5:11-13).

May God encourage us to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, never to be distracted from Him; to leave the judgment of the world to God; and by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ judge within the church whenever necessary (1 Cor 5:4). As Christians, we long to see righteousness in this world, as does the creation itself (Rom 8:22). Our concern, however, is that righteousness be found in the church, not the world. Until Christ comes, righteousness can not and will not ever be found in the world's systems and organizations. Let us look *at* Him alone and *to* Him alone, for it is *through* Him alone that we as the Church will "*yield ourselves to God, ... and our members as instruments of righteousness unto God*" (Rom 6:13; see also 1 John 3:2-3; 2 Cor 3:18).