

The Thinking Salvationist: Western Consumerism

I recently attended a Salvation Army Youth Councils at which the focus was 'Social Justice'. There were guest speakers and young adults testifying to the importance of 'Fair Trade' – a form of trade where workers are justly compensated for their work¹. I was encouraged by the passion and zeal with which these young people were spurring each other on to care about the things for which God cares, and to pray that God's justice would prevail. While praying, my eyes fell to the ground and I saw a sea of Nike shoes – a pair on almost every second teenager's feet. While in recent years, Nike has worked hard to increase its ethical production track record (and this is to be celebrated), there are still serious questions over some of its unethical business practices², particularly its use of sweatshop labor in the production of the very shoes which these teenagers were wearing. I shuddered at the thought of the amount of money that these teenagers – whose intentions were good – had given to a corporation which worked against the very thing for which they were praying.

In The Salvation Army of the western world, there is a significant disconnect between understanding that Social Justice is important and actually knowing what to do about it in our day to day lives. Social Justice is not simply an action which can be undertaken - it is a lifestyle; a way of living. In looking to Jesus' example we see that he not only performed individual acts of justice, but he lived right – "righteousness was his way of life"³. Part of this lifestyle includes making wise choices about how we as individuals spend our money. Anna Lappe said "*Every time you spend money, you're casting a vote for the kind of world you want*"⁴. In striving to live holy, and therefore socially just lives, our every action will reflect that desire. As a result, our desire for a world in which God's justice and truth reign must cause us to think about how and on what we spend our money.

Salvation Army Officers and soldiers are encouraged not to wear ostentatious or expensive jewellery when wearing uniform, so as to avoid the suggestion and assumption by the public that we as an organization are spending our money unwisely. So why does this encouragement seem not to apply when the uniform is removed at the end of the day? What is it that makes us think that we must be good stewards of The Salvation Army's money, yet allows us to be poor stewards of our own?

As a Youth Pastor was recently teaching on tithing and encouraging his youth to give their regular 10% tithe, he used the phrase "God only wants 10% of what you earn. The rest is yours to do with as you want!". While it is clear that his intentions were to portray to the youth that regular tithing is really not that

¹ Fair Trade USA, 'What is Fair Trade?', <http://www.fairtradeusa.org/what-is-fair-trade>, accessed 15th July, 2012

² Birch, S., 'How activism forced Nike to change its ethical game', The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/green-living-blog/2012/jul/06/activism-nike>, accessed 20th July 2012.

³ The Salvation Army International Social Justice Commission, 'Jesus and Justice', 2010, New York, p. 6

⁴ Johnson, W., 'A Down Payment on our Dream', Dare to Dream Blog, 10th January 2008, accessed 20th March 2012, www.daretodream.typepad.com/weblog/2008/01/what-our-dollar.html

difficult, the portrayal concerned me. While many would argue that 10 per cent of our regular earnings is what God requires of us, it is important to note that we are called to be good stewards of all that God has given us, not just that 10 per cent.

I recently attended a seminar on the extent of poverty sweeping the world. I heard statistics of children dying of hunger, of elderly people in developing nations perishing due to lack of funds for adequate health care, and of mothers dying during childbirth due to the absence of funds for basic health-care needs. Following this meeting, I rushed to a program at the local Corps, where I was met by a very excited young adult Salvationist. As I walked through the door, she exclaimed "I just bought my first designer handbag! It was on sale so it only cost me \$640.00". My heart sank. What a confused and unjust world we live in where Salvationists – those of us who are called to live lives of sacrifice and care for the lost, the last and the least – can happily spend our money on unnecessary consumer goods, while across the sea, other Salvationists are experiencing unnecessary hardships brought on by a lack of funds.

For the sake of good debate, it must be noted that some argue that what we spend is relative to that which we earn. Perhaps this is true. However, no matter which side of this debate you stand, it must be noted that we are hesitant to think of we earn in relation to what is needed by others. For instance, 'relativity' means little when an expectant mother in Africa can receive basic maternal care needs for as little as around \$40 in most western currencies.

Our understanding of what Jesus means by the word 'neighbour' in Luke Chapter 10 is crucial to this point. We are called to love and serve our neighbour, and as the expert in the law asked on that day, we often ask 'who is my neighbour?'. If we understand our neighbour to be 'those within tangible reach of our compassion', then love of neighbour seems to have little effect on the way in which we use our money. However, the challenge from Jesus is to redefine just how "widely our compassion can reach"⁵.

Today, access to the internet and communication between countries allows us to have a greater understanding of the ways in which our spent money affects other people in the world. The transaction need not end when we leave the store – we can quickly and easily learn where that money is going. A quick 'Google' search of "ethical buying" followed by the name of your country will most likely reveal a list of companies which are known to be ethically unjust in the production or sale of their goods. Giving our money to these companies, despite our knowledge of their unjust practices is not only poor-decision making, but it is poor stewardship. It is true that, in many cases, we will never truly know the origin and incidences involved in the products we buy, yet this is not an excuse to simply turn a blind eye to such questions. We must do our best to find out what we can in an effort to make the best possible impact through our spending choices.

⁵ The Salvation Army International Social Justice Commission, *op. cit.*, p. 25

Similarly, many companies are affiliated with political movements, not only in the western world but also in countries we may never have imagined them to be involved in. For example, questions have been raised regarding the linking of Max Brenner Chocolatier (through its parent company, the Strauss Group) to the Golani Reconnaissance Platoon – a part of the Israel Defense forces. This group is considered by many to be dangerous and perpetrators of human rights abuses. The claims were largely unproved, and the question here is not about which side of the Israeli-Palestinian debate you are on – the question is whether or not the western world, in purchasing Hot Chocolates and Fondu platters, had even considered the fact that they could actually be funding something much bigger than their hot drink.

At times, our new-found knowledge may mean that we may have to alter our buying tendencies in order to avoid funding such practices. We must search for alternatives – perhaps finding a company with a similar product which uses good business practices. If we find that there is no alternative, perhaps we are being called to create one! While it may be uncomfortable at times to be socially just in our spending choices, this discomfort will, in most cases, not measure to the discomfort experienced by those on the other end of the supply chain whom the unethical practices affect.

The most common response to this point is “But what difference will it make if just one person stops buying from this store?”. Let us not forget that we belong to an organization of over 1.5 million members, established in 124 countries. While the redirected spending of one may seem to be a drop in the ocean, we must not underestimate the effect that 1.5 million people redirecting their spending could have on the decisions made by a company.

It is time for us as individuals, and as The Army, to become more aware of where our money goes after it leaves our hands, and therefore what it is funding. However awareness is not the end point. Brooke Fraser sings “Now that I have seen, I am responsible”, and poet Maya Angelou stated “I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better”⁶. Let us choose to “do better” when we become aware that our spending may not be wise. Let us be informed, pray intelligently and give money strategically. In seeking to be a holy people, let us allow that desire to permeate every element of our everyday lives... right down to the change in your pocket. Let us be Thinking Salvationists.

So what can I do?...

- Download “Jesus and Justice”, the International Social Justice Commission’s bible study resource on understanding Social Justice as a lifestyle, rather than a series of acts. It can be accessed under resources at www.salvationarmy.org/isjc

⁶ Solomon, L., ‘Students learn to examine health and community from the inside out’, Woodruff Health Sciences Center, Spring 2012, accessed 15th September 2012, www.whsc.emory.edu/home/publications/public-health/public-health/spring2012/keeping-the-fish-in-the-fish-bowl.html

- If you find yourself frequenting a certain store, buying from one brand regularly, or purchasing an expensive item, Google the background and ethical buying practices of that store or brand. If you are still unsure after searching in this way, do some further research – contact the company or brand and ask them the hard questions yourself.
- Ask questions – don't be afraid to ask store clerks or representatives about the origins of their products – they may learn something too!
- Share your knowledge of ethical products with others, and encourage them to change their buying practices if needed. While each person has the autonomy to spend their money how they wish, a person who is uninformed cannot make that choice wisely.
- Re-assess your budget. Pray that God would reveal to you what it is that He requires of you in what you do with your money.