

“Buy from Companies With Bad Labor Practices?”

Like many young adults, I own an iPhone. It's cool, hip, useful, and just makes life easier. However, there have been issues with Apple's suppliers in China. An explosion in a Foxconn factory that made iPads in Chengdu killed 4 people and injured 18. Workers are often forced to stand on the job until their legs get swollen and they must live in crowded dormitories --- while earning only \$17-\$22 per day. Many workers are underage. There have been multiple suicide attempts, including an incident where 150 workers threatened to jump off a roof over pay disputes. Apple seems to be aware of conditions at its suppliers. Among 229 Apple factory audits in 2011, 93 were found to have work hour violations in excess of 60 hours per week. Perhaps most insightful was a statement made by an Apple executive: after \$13.6 billion in quarterly profit he suggested that sales could have been higher if overseas factories had been able to produce more! As a Christian, knowing the conditions in which iPhones and iPads are made, is it ethical to buy Apple products and thus support the growth of a corporation with these practices?

-Daniel

Dear Daniel

This case is a perfect example of why ethics is not just a simple, straightforward exercise of obeying a moral “absolute.” You are right to be troubled by this situation. It is wrong for us to knowingly contribute in a direct way to the exploitation and misery of any man or woman made in the image of God and the object of the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. Far too often we don't even think about the impact of our lives and choices on others, especially those who are far out of sight. All we have to do is read James 5 to see what God thinks of those who do not pay fair wages and who exploit their workforce (and James was writing to Christians!). This is not an isolated proof text but a consistent message through both Testaments

In the American colonial era, because of his Christian faith and values, Quaker John Woolman (1720-72) refused to wear clothing made of dyed material because the dye was produced by slave labor. Later in life he refused to ride in stage coaches because he felt the horses were too often mistreated. He refused to write up wills that included provisions to pass on ownership of slaves. This a straightforward, admirable testimony.

But things are not always so simple. Let's face it: Jesus and Paul paid taxes to an “evil empire” even though they couldn't have agreed with all of Rome's military or other policies. All through the Bible and Christian history believers have been called to be “in” even while not “of” the world, often tolerating the practices of Babylon or Egypt but always bearing witness to another, higher way. In the case of Chinese labor, are these jobs an improvement over their alternative? Are they at a stage that is ugly but is leading toward better circumstances (like American labor during the industrial revolution)? Can we influence Apple better as a customer (and employee?) or as a boycottter and protester from outside? Is there an alternative manufacturer with better labor practices who we could patronize? Could we work with Chinese churches on the ground in the PRC to help these workers and influence their bosses, rather than just boycott from a distance?

Those are just a few basic questions that can help us look for a deeper analysis and more faithful, effective way to resolve this dilemma. Remember that all biblical moral teaching was given to communities, not to isolated individuals. To fully understand, to wisely discern, and to faithfully carry out the right thing in God's eyes, we really need a small support/fellowship group with whom to study, discuss, and pray. Hold off on further purchases from deeply compromised sources until you talk and pray it out with your posse.