



MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

This edition:

BIBLE & ECONOMY

Ethical Consumption:

A new legalism or the law of love?

Jonathan Cornford (p.2)

HOME ECONOMICS

The Torah of Ethical Consumption:

Seven Guiding Principles (p.8)

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

Unintended Consequences?:

Might ethical consumption have negative effects on low-wage labourers?

Jonathan Cornford (p.9)

EVERYDAY PEOPLE

Together we can do more:

The story of our organic food co-op

Dave White (p.13)



News from Manna Gum

When we first started *Manna Matters* our approach was to try to provide a collection of short, easily readable pieces. However, over time we have increasingly felt the need to address issues in the Bible and in life, and especially the interaction of the two, with more nuance and complexity, and this inevitably has meant articles have grown in length (you may have noticed). The first article in this edition (Ethical Consumption) is the longest yet. It is always a struggle trying to balance our need to explore complexity but also keep articles readable. What do you think? Are the articles in this

edition too long, or do you like having some more substantive pieces in the mix? We would appreciate your feedback.

In this edition we have also introduced a new theme, 'Everyday People'. The idea is to document how ordinary people have tried to make decisions to re-imagine ways of living that are 'care-full' of people and the earth. It reflects our conviction that one of the greatest resources to help us learn that alternative choices are not only conceivable but achievable, is each other.

(continued back page)



ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

A new legalism or the law of love?

by Jonathan Cornford

I abhor almost everything about KFC and what it represents. I abhor the sort of agriculture that is required to supply it and what this does to farmers, to animals, to the land and to the poor; I abhor the form of food that is produced and the resulting health impacts in our community, especially amongst the marginalised; I abhor the forms of marketing, advertising and branding it employs, and the ways in which it manipulates and distorts desire, family, sexuality, childhood and adolescence; and I abhor the style of business it represents, particularly how it drives out locally-rooted independent small-scale businesses.

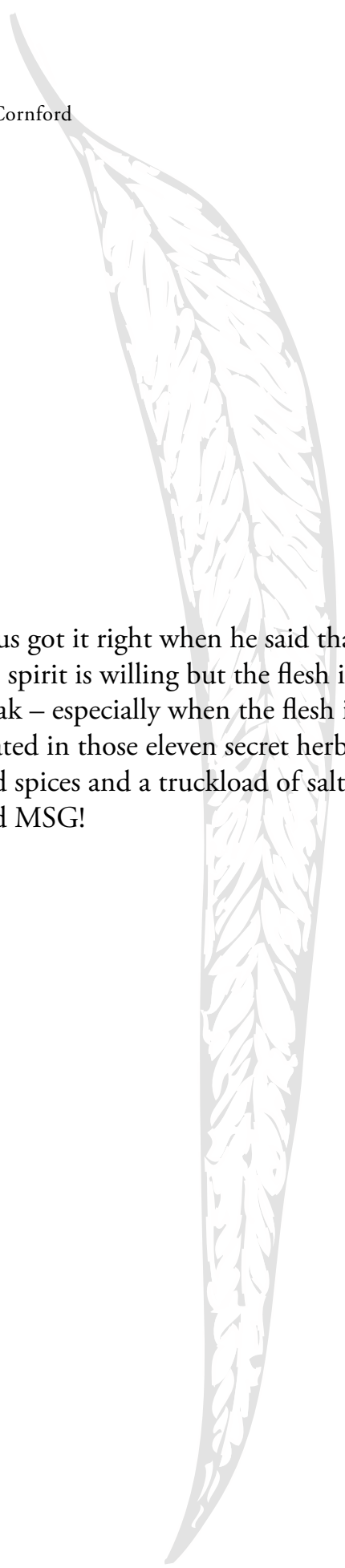
But geez I love that chicken and those chips!

Every summer, when the cricket is on, saturated with KFC adverts and branding, I am plunged into a titanic spiritual struggle. Jesus got it right when he said that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak – especially when the flesh is coated in those eleven secret herbs and spices and a truckload of salt and MSG! As the cricket season progresses the tension becomes unbearable, and I inevitably end up making a surreptitious trip down to the local KFC to buy some of that infernal chicken, feeling more self-conscious than if I was buying pornography. To make matters worse, my good friend Nick Ray, author of *The Guide to Ethical Supermarket Shopping* and generally inspirational human being, lives just across the road from our local KFC. Damn!! Perhaps the Apostle Paul was fighting the aroma of those chicken fryers when he wrote: 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. [...] Wretched man that I am!' (Rom 7:15-24)

What I am describing here is an example of the tormenting struggle between conscience and desire which many people would experience in one form or another. In this case, however, my struggle is entirely the product of my subscription to a self-imposed code of conduct that might loosely be called 'ethical consumption' or 'responsible consumption'. But there are many who quite understandably ask: is all that torment worth it?

This question can be broken down into some more probing questions of ethical consumption: (i) does it achieve any good in the world?; (ii) what will happen to the people who rely on 'unethically' produced goods for a livelihood if I switch my purchasing behaviour?; and (iii) for those who are Christian and interested in trying to follow a Christ-centred way of life, what does this mean for how we think about faith? Or to put it another way, what is a Christian way of thinking about the struggles and conundrums involved in ethical consumption?

There is a mass of writing about the first of these questions (including *Manna Matters* Nov 2009) so I won't tackle that here, and the second question is addressed in the following article of this edition on p.9. The third of these questions is, in my experience, rarely articulated but exists as a tension just below the surface for many Christians who begin to explore ethical consumption. When I am at a friend's house and they are serving coffee that is not Fair Trade, should I have some?



Jesus got it right when he said that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak – especially when the flesh is coated in those eleven secret herbs and spices and a truckload of salt and MSG!

When someone gives me a box of chocolates that is not Fair Trade, should I eat it? These are immediate questions but they have deeper theological implications, and it is this that we shall explore here.

The idea of ethical consumption is founded on two simple primary principles:

1. Our need to reduce unnecessary and frivolous consumption, thereby reducing the strain on the earth's resources and on the other creatures who share this planet.
2. Our need to encourage production processes that take better care of people and the earth. Generally, but not always, this involves being prepared to pay a higher price.

However, as simple as the principles sound, actualising them in day-to-day life is immensely complex – the genius of our consumer system is that the true story of the impacts on people and places is entirely hidden from our view. That is why, over the last couple of decades, a huge amount of work has gone into developing some easily recognisable proxies for these principles that allow the average person to translate ethical aspirations into action at the checkout. These proxies are starting to become well known: Fair Trade, organic, no sweat, free range, palm oil free, GMO free, 100% recycled etc. But there are other considerations too: company ownership, the amount and type of packaging, and transport miles.

In 2007 the Ethical Consumer Group produced the *Guide to Ethical Supermarket Shopping* that comes out in a new edition every year. The fact that the *Guide* sells more than 20,000 a year is an indication that concern about the impact of our consumption is not limited to a few fringe hippies and radicals. The *Guide* offers a simplified means of choosing

But in following these proxies to guide what I buy, have I unwittingly subscribed to a new kosher? Do we now have a new form of clean and unclean foods?

between similar or identical products by distilling a huge amount of information about the record of the companies behind the products down to four different types of ticks or crosses. As I mentioned, Nick Ray, one of the authors of the guide is a good friend. Nick is painfully aware that such ticks and crosses cannot adequately represent the situational and moral complexity of the choices we are faced with; however, he is also painfully aware of the need to help people move beyond analysis paralysis. Thus, when standing at the supermarket shelf for olive oil, rather than agonise over a series of conundrums and lack of information, I can choose the one that is made in Australia, and owned by an Australian company that gets a tick for company record.

So I choose the products that get the tick, or have the Fair Trade badge, or are certified organic. And I try, despite myself, not to choose KFC. But in following these proxies to guide what I buy, have I unwittingly subscribed to a new *kosher*? Do we now have a new form of clean and unclean foods, the consumption of which marks the righteous from the unrighteous? If I say that I make these choices based on faith and conscience, am I saying that God

requires them? Is not this then justification by works rather than faith? In short, is there a danger that by adopting an ethical code of conduct about what we buy and eat, we are in fact setting up a new legalism, the sort of religious system that was overthrown by Jesus and Paul?

To explore these questions requires untying, or at least loosening, some deep-seated theological knots: our attitudes to and understanding of the Old Testament law; our understanding of where Jesus, and then Paul, stood in relation to this law; and how this informs our approach to modern codes of conduct.



Torah Re-visited

To usefully compare modern ethical codes of conduct to the Old Testament law – the *Torah* – we need to gain a fuller sense of both the positive and negative implications of such a comparison. Rather than ‘the law’, a more sympathetic interpretation of the word ‘Torah’ is *instruction* or *teaching*. Although, because of the huge gap of context it is hard for us to see, Torah is far from an arbitrary list of rules. It is, rather, a detailed, wide-ranging, holistic, integrated vision of what it would look like for humans to live in *shalom* (right relationship) with each other, with creation and with God. It addresses not just religious rules, but economics, politics, ecology and situational ethics. Torah not only provides a series of instructions and guidances on how individuals can conduct themselves ethically in the day to day complexities of life, but articulates a structure of society in which – as Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker movement would have said – it is easier for people to be good. More than that, it is through the Israelites’ obedience to Torah that they are to *embody the character of God in the world*. It is by living out this instruction in God’s way of life that God’s people are to tell the world about God. (For a fuller exposition of these ideas, see *Manna Matters* Nov 2009.)

Both Jesus and Paul affirm the fundamental goodness of the intent of Torah. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus famously states: ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.’ (Matt 5:17) Paul, in his extended discourse on the law in the letter to the Romans, declares that ‘the Torah is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good’ (Rom 7:12).

Nevertheless, one of the defining conflicts within the gospels

is between Jesus and those who have most staked their faith to Torah-observance, the Pharisees. Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees is strident and unrelenting, pointing out that in their ever-more intricate development of rules to live by, the Pharisees have ‘strained out a gnat but swallowed a camel’. In Matthew chapter 23, Jesus pronounces an extended indictment of the rules-based religion of the Pharisees. The Torah that was intended to give guidance in the ways of justice and shalom has ended up squeezing out the place of love for one’s neighbour, it has replaced the need for honest and humble self-reflection in the presence of God, and it has ultimately become a vehicle of death rather than life. Jesus’ re-interpretation of a series of Torah commandments in Matthew 5, and his general unconcern for rigid Sabbath-observance (see Matt 12:1-8) reveal his purpose both to reclaim

the intent of Torah, but ultimately to go well beyond it in fully revealing the way that leads to life.

And it is Paul, the once Pharisee, who, after his conversion encounter with the risen Jesus, is led to dramatically declare that those who are ‘in Christ’ are no longer under the law. Paul’s life is gripped by the breathtaking insight that God’s covenant with Abraham (‘all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’ - Gen 12:3) and the intentions of Torah (the faithful embodiment of the character of God) are all *accomplished* in Jesus. Paul understands that the whole meaning and intent of Torah has now come to fruition, which means it has taken new shape. And for Paul, the new shape of following God is summed up in one little phrase with a big meaning: ‘faith in Christ’. Scholars such as NT Wright and Luke Timothy Johnson have argued that our English rendering of this pivotal Greek phrase (*pistis Christou*) does

For Paul there is now only one defining teaching and instruction, one ‘Torah’, to live by, and that is the person and *the lived example* of Jesus.



not quite do it justice. A fuller rendering would be something like 'faith in Christ' *plus* 'the faith of Christ'. Following rules and commandments might be an easily comprehensible way of practising religion, but it fails to achieve the profound transformation (the second birth) that God desires for us. For Paul there is now only one defining teaching and instruction, one 'Torah', to live by, and that is the person and the *lived example* of Jesus.

Paul is therefore horrified at the scurrilous suggestions that one can have an intellectual and abstract 'faith in Jesus' that then somehow allows one to ignore frameworks for living in right relationship. Paul is on the one hand adamant that the life of faith is the life of grace and therefore cannot be lived by a written set of rules; but on the other hand he is also adamant that the life of faith in Jesus requires the conforming of our whole conduct in this world to '*the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus*' (Rom 8:2). He calls for our bodies to be given as 'living sacrifices' (Rom 12:1) and declares that the ethical standard of life is now fundamentally simple, yet profoundly demanding:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Gal 5:13-14)

Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:1)

Paul & Ethical Eating

Like Jesus, Paul's call is both liberating and daunting. What does it mean to love my neighbour in all the complex interactions of life? If we had no more guidance than this we might struggle to agree on how to interpret Paul's intention, but luckily we have a couple of instances where Paul works this principle through in relation to the ethics of eating, and he shows how his approach is finely nuanced to the complexities of situation and circumstance.

In 1 Corinthians chapters 8-10 and Romans 14 Paul addresses questions of conscience that have come up around eating in these two communities. In Corinth, a community with largely ex-pagan converts, a dispute has arisen as to whether Christians should or should

not eat meat that has been sacrificed to pagan idols. In Rome, perhaps a more mixed community of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, Paul gives guidance on how these two entirely different food cultures can co-exist within one body. What is immediately striking when reading these passages is that Paul's guidance is not simple. Paul steadfastly refuses to lay down a rule about 'what is right', but rather insists his readers dig below the surface of their own ideas about food and pay attention to the *relational implications* of their

actions. How do their decisions about food affect others?

In Corinth, it seems that some Christians, self-confident in their belief that there is only one God, have insisted that there is no harm in eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols, as such idols are not real. (Most butchery in the Hellenistic world was associated with the rituals of a pagan temple of some sort.) Paul agrees with them. Meanwhile, others in the community are not able to disassociate eating such meat from supporting the idolatrous religion that they have turned their backs on. Paul is entirely sympathetic with their position. What are they to do? Paul refuses to admit an absolute right or wrong with either partaking or abstaining, but rather insists on one principle:

'All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other. (1 Cor 10:23-24)

In particular Paul insists that 'the strong' (and surely his usage of this term is laden with some irony), those who are self-confident in their beliefs, show regard to 'the weak' (those whose consciences are fragile) and *be prepared to change their eating habits* for their benefit: 'if food can be the cause of a brother's downfall, I will never eat meat any more' (1 Cor 8:13).

In his letter to the Romans, Paul similarly refuses to take sides in their differences around eating, but points them to the same principle. While Paul recognises that there are different perspectives on the ethics of eating within the community, he is sharply critical of anyone whose adherence to one perspective has led them to become judgemental of those who differ. Rather than try and bring these groups to a common perspective on the Jewish food taboos (either for or against them), Paul is concerned that each person act with integrity to their own conscience: 'The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve' (14:22). However, Paul is also fundamentally concerned that

Paul steadfastly refuses to lay down a rule about 'what is right', but rather insists his readers dig below the surface of their own ideas about food and pay attention to the *relational implications* of their actions.

each person's conduct take into account the good of the whole community: 'If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love ... Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat' (v.15, 20). While Paul is not disagreeing with anyone's intellectual conviction, *in practice* he is asking that those who have no

inhibitions about food and drink to nevertheless be prepared to accept some restrictions, for the sake of their brothers and sisters. What is crystal clear to Paul is that personal gratification should never get in the way of relationship: 'For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but justice, peace and joy' (v.17).

A Modern Torah?

So what does all this mean for us now? Would Paul support contemporary efforts at ethical consumption, or would he see it as a barrier to ‘the law of the spirit of life’?

What should be immediately clear from the above discussion, but what nevertheless still needs to be stressed, is that Paul is not at all interested in what we might call ‘purity’. He shows absolutely no concern that what you eat or drink might somehow put you on the wrong side of God.

From my observation, there is sometimes a real danger that discussion of ethical consumption amongst Christians can implicitly assume – without ever quite articulating it – that the goal is ‘not doing the wrong thing’; or to put it more bluntly, staying clean. Perhaps, even more worrying, the goal can even subtly shift to *being seen* to do ‘the right thing’.

When ethical consumption becomes a code for ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’, then it must be rejected. For one thing, it would require all those proxies we have developed to guide ethical consumption to always be ‘right’ all the time (an impossible ask), or else the whole exercise becomes futile. Moreover, the idea that in this mind-bogglingly complex global economy we could somehow achieve a status of being ‘pure’, no longer implicated in wrongs of the world, is delusional.

But more seriously, as both Paul and Jesus understood, purity codes have the effect of creating division between people – of delineating those who are ‘in’ and those who are ‘out’, and further leading those who are ‘in’ to become judgemental of those who are not. And that is one thing that Jesus and Paul won’t countenance: ‘Who are you to pass judgement on the servant of another?’ (Rom 14:4); ‘Judge not, so that you may not be judged’ (Matt 7:1).

More than once I have heard new converts to ethical consumption agonise over whether they should or should not drink the coffee at their friends’ house, knowing that it is not Fair Trade. From a Pauline perspective, this is a non-issue: drinking a cup of Nescafe (that your friend has already bought) is not going to hurt anyone, however, refusing the hospitality of a friend (or anyone for that matter) has more serious relational

implications. In our household we have made a decision not to buy any Nestle products because of their woeful corporate record, but it would be rude, ungrateful and plain wasteful not to accept and enjoy a box of Nestle chocolates that someone, acting out of kindness, has bought for us. The great spiritual danger of purity codes is that they become a substitute for, or even a barrier to, *faith*, that small-but-huge word that Paul uses to describe the ongoing process by which humans struggle to be oriented to the God of love, the only source of real life.

So a concern for purity – something that supposedly keeps us on the right side of God – is not a reason that Paul would endorse for exploring ethical consumption; however, there are some much more substantive reasons to take up an ethical











When ethical consumption becomes a code for ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’, then it must be rejected.

code of conduct in consumption, and these align closely with Paul’s primary concerns.

As noted above, foundational to Paul’s instructions on eating is the *relational implications* of people’s

decisions: ‘For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but justice, peace and joy’ (Rom 14:17). In this quote Paul is drawing on the big Hebrew concepts of justice/righteousness and peace/shalom (right relationship) that fill all his writings. It represents his conviction that through the coming of Jesus, God is undertaking the work of putting the world to rights – of establishing right relationship between people, between people and God, and between people and creation – and that those who are ‘in Christ’ are called to participate in this great shalom-making purpose (see 2 Cor 5:17-20).

One of the great accomplishments of people such as Nick Ray, the Ethical Consumer Group and others like them, has been to lift the veil on the consumer economy and show how, through our acts of consumption, *we are in relationship* with people all over the world, and with the earth itself. And the reason this incredibly dense web of relationships is so ingeniously hidden from our view is that so much of it is exploitative and alienating, the opposite of justice and shalom. Through the frameworks of ethical consumption, however, we can, *acting out of love and from our own free will*, choose to restrict our own consumption and limit our own gratification in order to make the best choice

CHOCOLATE  Child labour, pesticides, palm oil		
Cocolo ★ 1,2	Organic Trader	 ✓
Scarborough Fair ★ 1,2	Lighthouse Ventures	NZL ✓
Haigh’s	Haigh’s Chocolates	 ✓
Sweet William	Sweet William	 ✓
Peanut Slab, Whittakers	Whittakers	NZL ✓
Chocolatier ★ 3	Chocolatier Australia	 ✓
Darrell Lea	Darrell Lea (Quinn Family)	 ✓
Paton’s	Paton’s Macadamias	 ✓
Bueno, Ferrero Rocher, Kinder, Raffaello	Ferrero	ITA ✓
Ernest Hillier, Hillier’s, Newman’s	Ernest Hillier	 ~
Ballantyne	Fyna	 ~
Menz	Robern Menz	 ~
Guylian	Guylian (Lotte)	JPN ~
Vivani ★ 2	Ludwig Weinrich	GER ~
Whitman’s	Russell Stover Candies	USA ~
Lindor, Lindt	Lindt & Sprüngli	SWI ✗
Dagoba ★ 2, Hershey’s, Reese’s	Hershey	USA ✗
Bounty, Celebrations, Dove, M&Ms, Maltesers, Mars ★ 5, Milky Way, Minstrels, Pods, Snickers, Twix	Mars	USA ✗

that we can for the sake of our neighbour, and for the sake of God's good earth upon which we all depend. Surely this is an idea of which Paul would thoroughly approve.

When acting from this basis, we are acting according to what Paul calls 'the law [Torah] of the spirit of life'. Not only is it a choice of love, it is a choice of *conscience*, which is another way of saying it is a choice to integrate belief and action, and this also is critical for Paul. Knowing what we now know about our consumer system, how can we now read Jesus' challenging response to the question 'Who is my neighbour?' and continue to ignore the implications of our consumption for others? 'Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from *faith*' (Rom 14:22-23).

But this is exactly where we need teaching and guidance, because the complexity of the consumer system so effectively obscures what a choice for love might look like. The frameworks and proxies that have been developed around ethical consumption (see p.8) offer practical guidance - yes, a kind of Torah - for negotiating these complexities in our day-to-day choices. Indeed, by invoking the comparison to Torah, we very usefully gain a sense of the benefit, but also the dangers and limitations, of trying to live by such frameworks.

So let's embrace ethical consumption frameworks for what they are, and not imagine that they are something more. They are partial, contextual improvisations that help us to more easily make good choices in a global economy that is horribly

broken and horrendously complex. They are not infallible and they are not the last word on what is right or good, and neither should we expect them to be. Tools such as the *Ethical Guide* are based upon the best information available, however, such information is never perfect or complete, and is changing rapidly. Certification codes such as Fair Trade and Australian Certified Organic are systems which endeavour to guarantee better treatment of people and the land, however, all human systems are liable to break down somewhere along the line. Don't be dismayed or even surprised when some certification code is shown to be flawed in some way - they too will always need scrutiny, critique and improvement. Don't let our inability to make 'the perfect choice' (whatever that is) stop us from making the best choices that we have available to us. What the world needs of us and what God hopes for us is not that we attain moral perfection, but that we form habits in trying to choose what is good, acting out of love for our neighbour and for the earth, even if we sometimes fail, and even if we sometimes just can't quite resist slipping down to the local KFC ...

The other day I read an article in an organic gardening magazine that rhetorically declared, 'What could be better than growing your own organic kale?' I reckon I could think of a few things. Top of my list would be if I could get my hands on some locally-sourced, organic, free range, Kentucky-style fried chicken made by a locally-owned, independent small business! I reckon I might just pass up the organic kale for some of that ...

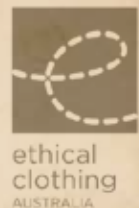




The Torah of Ethical Consumption

Seven Guiding Principles

1. Buy less stuff!
2. Choose longer-lasting and better quality.
 - less plastic, less toxic materials, more durability, less packaging, more recyclability
3. Can you buy what you need second hand?
 - clothing, technology (phones, computers, TVs etc), furniture and other household items, cars and bikes, and much more ...
4. Where possible, choose products with certification systems that provide some protection for people and the environment, in particular, look for:
 - Fair Trade
 - Organic and Free Range
 - Ethical clothing Australia
 - Palm Oil free - Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil
 - Marine Stewardship Council certified seafood
5. Preference products marked 'Product of Australia'.
This means that the bulk of the materials and manufacturing have been sourced here; 'Made in Australia' refers only to manufacture.
6. Use *The Guide to Ethical Supermarket Shopping* to:
 - preference Australian-owned companies
 - preference companies with better corporate records
 - avoid companies with poor corporate records
7. Agitate for change.
Support efforts to encourage the major brands and retailers to take more responsibility for workers' rights and the environment.



For more tips and information, see www.ethical.org.au



Unintended Consequences?

Might ethical consumption have negative effects on low-wage labourers?

by Jonathan Cornford

In April this year, the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh shocked the world. The day before the disaster, cracks had appeared in columns and walls of the building, and workers evacuated. The next day, workers still felt uneasy about entering the building despite assurances from the owner that it was safe. They were told that they would lose their jobs if they did not enter and begin work. Eventually, the police arrived with batons and forced workers to go to work in the building. More than 1100 people died that day. Of the survivors, more than 100 required amputation of limbs; many more received other life-long debilitating disabilities.

In the wake of the Rana Plaza disaster it is not surprising that many have renewed their calls for shoppers to buy from sources where there is some substantive and demonstrable commitment to worker rights. Indeed, in *Manna Matters* we have consistently argued that one of the most urgent challenges for Western Christians is to find ways to become more responsible for the impact of our consumption.

However, there is a significant objection that needs to be raised at this point. It is not just an objection of those who want to defend the status quo – it is also an objection of many who are concerned about poverty and justice. The objection goes something like this:

'If we all start switching our consumption to ethical sources, what will happen to all the labourers in China and around the world who work in factories supplying cheap stuff to the world? Sure, they are earning low wages, but isn't it better to have a low wage than no wage? Although choosing ethical products might be nice for my conscience, isn't it also just taking work away from the poorest who really need it?'

Before getting into the substance of this question, it is worth taking a moment to notice some of the implicit elements of this line of reasoning. The underlying suggestion is that our historically unprecedented levels of consumption are actually helping lift others out of poverty. Indeed, this is what many mainstream economists say repeatedly. What a happy coincidence! Boil that down and we have the formula: my ethical responsibility for justice and to care for my neighbour demands I participate fully in the consumer economy and ensure its endless expansion. Who am I in the world? I am a consumer.



'If we all start switching our consumption to ethical sources, what will happen to all the labourers in China and around the world who work in factories supplying cheap stuff to the world?'



(This is exactly what our leaders are telling us: George Bush after the September 11 attacks and Kevin Rudd when the global financial crisis hit both made a particular plea to their citizens: don't stop shopping!)

Hmmmm. We can begin to see where there might be some theological and ecological objections to this line of argument. It is always important to be clear with ourselves about where self-interest and reasoning intersect. Nevertheless, whether or not this argument represents a convenient rationalisation of avoiding change, there is still the much more important question of whether it is true or not. Let's examine these objections.

Doesn't buying the products of low-wage labour mean I am supporting those people who depend on low-wage jobs?

In the most immediate and direct sense, there is some truth to this statement. When you buy something cheap from China – the world's manufacturing powerhouse – you are endorsing a production system that gave a job to some people – let's call them Jack and Jill – who may well be thankful of even the low-wage that it offers. However, it cannot be said that you are actually supporting Jack and Jill. What our dollars do is support a *production and retail system* that is currently employing Jack and Jill. This system is made up of a long and complicated supply chain, with brands and retailers at the top, and underneath them sub-contracting suppliers and sub-sub-contracting factories, who are the actual employers of Jack and Jill. As Nike will tell you, they have never employed people like Jack and Jill – Nike don't make shoes at all, they just market them.

As the brands and retailers don't actually own any factories, they can choose to get their products made anywhere in the world, so we should not be particularly surprised or shocked

that they will generally contract whoever is quoting the lowest price. Major brands have astronomical marketing costs, so they are keen to keep production costs as low as possible. It has been estimated that in 2001 Nike paid Tiger Woods more money for his endorsements than the entire 160,000 Indonesian workforce who were making Nike shoes that year.

This system, where brands and retailers choose where they source their production based on the lowest cost is referred to as *capital mobility*, which means that the people with the money can take their money wherever in the globe they prefer. When cost factors in a particular country begin to change too much – for example, if the government introduces a minimum wage, or labour becomes more scarce and workers are able to demand a higher price, or if new environmental regulations are introduced, or if taxation rules change – then companies will begin to source their production somewhere cheaper, and Jack and Jill lose their jobs.

This is precisely what has been happening along the east coast of China for the past few years. Since its extraordinary industrial boom in the 1990s, this is where the vast majority of China's exporting factories have been located, offering a seemingly endless supply of low-wage labour and attractive investment and taxation conditions. However, in 2008 the Chinese Government, beginning to get worried about the politically destabilising effect of breath-taking social inequality, introduced a new labour law that increased the cost of labour. At the same time, under pressure over the growing list of environmental disasters associated

with the manufacturing boom, the Government tightened its environmental regulation of industry. When the global financial crisis hit, bringing a reduced demand for China's exports, producers decided the cost equation was no longer to their liking. In 2009, 10,000 clothing and footwear factories shut down in Guangdong and relocated elsewhere. That is a lot of Jacks and Jills out of work.

In 2009 10,000 clothing and footwear factories shut down in Guangdong and relocated elsewhere.

So rather than supporting Jack and Jill in Guangdong, our purchasing of low-wage labour products only ends up supporting *the system* that is endlessly seeking out the cheapest labour. Where did they go? One of the biggest winners of rising costs in China has been Bangladesh. Since the financial crisis, Australian garment orders in Bangladesh have increased by 1500%, with heavy involvement from many of the big name brands such as Coles, K-Mart, Big W, Target, Rivers and Cotton On. The combination of very low wages, very weak regulation, and a large, skilled-but-poor workforce has made Bangladesh something of a gold rush for clothing retailers. Only months before the Rana Plaza tragedy, retailers and brands had rejected a modest proposal to improve safety because it would have added a few cents to the cost of each item. And although the scale and drama of Rana Plaza made news headlines, for those who follow Bangladeshi labour conditions it was not news at all – not many months before 112 people died in a garment factory fire, and there were 42 other such factory fires in the preceding 18 months.

In a recent *Four Corners* investigation, one factory owner openly stated that prices being demanded by Coles (for their low-cost fashion brand, ‘Mix’) made it impossible to be compliant to safety regulations (you can watch the documentary on www.abc.net.au/4corners). Another Coles supplier sometimes forced its workers to stay working until 3:30am to fill orders, and if necessary, even locked them in for the whole night. (It was during such a lock-in that the 112 workers perished in a factory fire in November 2012.) Needless to say, working conditions in Bangladesh are appalling, however, in the Maplecroft global labour rights and safety index, Bangladesh (17th worst) is ranked well ahead of China and Pakistan (3rd and 2nd worst respectively).

The response of retailers following the Rana Plaza collapse was telling. The first response was almost universally to distance themselves from the factories and factory owners – they are just the buyers, they can’t be held responsible for conditions on the ground. The second, when it became clear there was an upswell of public anger, was to make noises about withdrawing from Bangladesh. Here we see the effects of capital mobility once again. Rather than pay a higher price to factories that would allow better wages and better conditions,



Low-wage urban labour in the developing world cannot be properly understood without first understanding what has been happening to land and to agriculture.

and especially rather than *invest directly* in factories to have much closer involvement with worker conditions, many retailers prefer simply to wipe their hands and relocate to somewhere that is off the public radar. Where will they go? Some are touting Cambodia as the next big destination.

Who are Jack and Jill anyway?

At this point we need to ask a question that is all too rarely asked: who are these low-wage labourers for whom our extravagant consumption is so graciously providing a job? In China and Bangladesh, low-wage manufacturing booms have been celebrated as the solution to rural poverty. Certainly, the vast majority of low-wage labourers in countries such as China, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia are rural-urban migrants. They are people who have left village-based agricultural settings to seek work in the city. In China since the 1980s, more than 130 million people have left their rural homes to become urban labourers – the largest peace-time movement of people in human history. They currently represent one-third of the urban workforce and

are overwhelmingly concentrated in ‘3-D jobs’ (dangerous, dirty and demeaning). In the cities, rural migrants face systemic discrimination from the law, government services, landlords and the resident population in general. Frequently their mental health and their physical health suffer.

In Bangladesh, families with both parents working in garment factories struggle to pay for even slum rents and a meagre subsistence diet. Why choose this?

Low-wage urban labour in the developing world cannot be properly understood without first understanding what has been happening to land and to agriculture. The particulars and circumstances vary across countries, however, there are typically three common threads. Firstly, over the past half century, rural populations have been faced with the steady loss of agricultural land and other natural resources (forests and fisheries) upon which they depend. The factors driving this process vary significantly. In Cambodia, rural people in every province have lost huge amounts land and forest to the crudest forms of land-grabbing by powerful elites. In Bangladesh, loss of land and resources has been more associated with land degradation and climate change impacts, such as flooding, salinisation and drought. In China, land degradation on a colossal scale – soil erosion, desertification and salinisation affecting almost 40% of the country – has undermined the productivity of rural populations since the disastrous policies of Mao Tse Tung. More recently, it has been estimated that about 50 million farmers in China (more than twice Australia’s population!) have been displaced by land-grabbing for urban and industrial development as part of the economic boom.

Even lack of access to clean water, which we tend to imagine as an endemic condition of rural poverty, is a problem of

largely modern character. It is estimated that perhaps as much as half of the world's freshwater habitats were lost during the 20th century, primarily as a result of water extraction, drainage and in-filling, and erosion from vegetation clearing. Combined with population growth and pollutants (effluent, plastics and chemicals) the disappearance of freshwater not only makes water more scarce, but tends to seriously undermine the quality of remaining freshwater sources.

Closely tied with the process of loss of land and resources has been the widespread ecological decline, and therefore declining ecological productivity, of land and resources. Most rural communities in the developing world have, to varying degrees, derived a portion of their livelihood – both food and materials – outside of the monetary economy, from the commons of forests, rivers, grasslands and wetlands. This is a double whammy – not only are there less land and resources available, those that are available are less and less productive. Add to this rapid population growth, and you can begin to see that in very many places the viability of rural communities has been seriously undermined.

Finally, the rural sector virtually everywhere has been trapped in declining terms of trade with the city. This means that the primary produce of the country has been consistently economically undervalued compared to the goods and services of the city. This is one of the economic characteristics of the industrial era, and indeed it is a necessary ingredient of the current consumer system. This structure was virtually enshrined in the global economy through the international trade agreements developed by Western countries following the Second World War (through the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade and now the World Trade Organisation). Farmers are trapped in a system of low prices and high risk and they can see with their own eyes that cities are where profits are made.

Put simply, agriculture the world over is under immense strain, and therefore rural communities the world over are under immense strain. Now add to this the increased exposure of rural communities, through TV and transport mobility, to the amazing wealth of the cities, and it is not hard to see why cities are exerting an incredibly strong gravitational pull for the rural poor, and especially the young.

When we take in the big picture, we can see that it is the same consumer system that is making the life of rural communities untenable all over the world that is also offering the supposed

'solution' of low-wage labour. Of course, those caught in such a crunch take whatever job they can get and are thankful even for a subsistence wage under exploitative conditions. But should we applaud the fact that they are placed in such a position?

To sum up then, buying the products of low-wage labour cannot be said to support the actual people (Jack and Jill) who work in the factories; it merely supports the system that continually seeks out the lowest paid labour, regularly discarding workers in one region when cheaper workers in another region become available. Furthermore, we can't fully appreciate why so many are so willing to engage in low-paid dirty, dangerous and demeaning labour until we understand what is happening to agriculture and the ecological systems in which agricultural communities reside. Cheap consumer goods, whether they be food, technology, household items or plastic goods, are a double whammy of exploitation – they are only made possible by highly destructive forms of mining the earth's resources (whether it be soils, rivers, forests, oceans or minerals), which in turn drives the poor who have depended upon these resources into the cities of the world to become the factory fodder of the global middle class.



What should we do? If you are looking for some neat solution that explains how the world can move seamlessly from this system to a more just and sustainable system and tells you how to act in the meantime without troubling your conscience, then you need to seek some alternate reality because such a thing is not possible here. But even if we cannot yet see how to solve the whole riddle, we have a desperate need to begin to make choices that point to a better way. As Dorothy Day once wrote, 'Our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy, rotten system'. Our actions need to signal our non-acceptance of this filthy, rotten system. While neither complete or fool-proof, the ideas behind ethical consumption (see p.8) offer guidance and instruction (or *Torah*, see article on p.2) for how we can begin to say 'no' to one system and 'yes' to another. As the Ethical Consumer Group says, 'Your dollar is your vote'.

Together we can do more

The story of our organic food co-op

by Dave White

Every day we make choices about our food: what we do or don't eat; the type of products we buy; and where we choose to shop to name just a few. Examining these choices can help us understand our values and the ways we choose to embody them. Too often we ignore the ethics behind our food and how we might be able to express our faith in the ordinary choices that we make every day. The following example is one small step in examining this process.

I live in Footscray, in Melbourne's western suburbs, with my wife Dom and sons Hugo and Jasper. Close by and within walking distance are a variety of fresh food options including the Footscray Markets, Little Saigon (a Vietnamese food market), multiple supermarkets and small grocers. However, it is in the heart of Footscray, amongst these options that a group of people have been experimenting with how we purchase our food. It is here that we are trying to lessen the environmental impact that collectively we have on the earth by choosing to buy food that uses no chemicals.

In 2001, ten households got together to begin what is now called the Western Organic Co-operative (WOC). Each week, each household put in \$20 and we bought our fruit and vegetables collectively. By combining our money the group found that it could increase its purchasing power. Due to environmental and health concerns the group decided to only buy organic fruit and vegetables.

Initially the food was bought from a small social enterprise called Grasslands. In addition to going to the wholesale market, they had a direct relationship with the growers and had small descriptions of them up on their shop wall. After a couple of years, when this was no longer tenable, we became an incorporated association so that we could go directly to the wholesale markets ourselves. This further increased our value for money, and we are now getting our organic fruit and vegies for about 30-50% of the retail price.

By 2004 the co-operative had doubled its size. It became obvious that for the co-operative to work well we needed to have a number of systems in place. This included rosters for buying, sorting and delivering the food, and a central payment system. The simple rule is that everyone has to do something. One of my earliest recollections of the food co-op is helping with Friday morning sorting of vegies four or five weeks in a row. This was because as the co-op was small it required more effort by members to keep it running. As we have grown over the years the structure of the WOC has evolved and roles have continued to be divided amongst members.

Our systems now run remarkably smoothly; in fact, so well that there grew to be a large demand to join our little co-op. However, we had learnt through experience that there is an optimum size for these sort of voluntary cooperatives, and have capped our membership at 25 households. Rather than just say no to a bunch of people, we instead decided to use our model to help others set up similar small collectives, and there are now five other organic food co-ops in Melbourne's inner-west.

Each week, each household put in \$20 and we bought our fruit and vegetables collectively. By combining our money the group found that it could increase its purchasing power.



Dave, Dom, Hugo & Jasper during a vegie sort on a freezing Friday morning.



Anthony and Pieter buying the food from the Melbourne Wholesale Markets. Buyers have to be there by 6am on a Friday morning.

Four times a year the WOC also holds dry-goods days. This is where we pool our money to buy bulk organic dry goods such as rice, flour or oil, and then get together to divide it all out amongst ourselves. Buying and sorting bulk food on these dry goods days has helped me to realise the excessive amount of packaging that supermarket food comes in. I now try to make choices in minimising the food I buy that has packaging and sometimes this means choosing not to buy anything at all.

What I like most about the WOC are the intangibles that keep it going. These include the incidental meeting of people when dropping off the veggie box at their house, the dry-goods gatherings and knowing that everyone else in the WOC is trying to work out how to use a strange looking vegetable they received that week. All of these things contribute to the building of local community and strengthening the social fabric.

Since I have been involved with the WOC I have learnt to appreciate even more where my food comes from, that food runs in seasons, and how to work better within the natural rhythms of nature. For example, in Victoria it often gets quite cold in the winter. This limits the different types of vegetables you can grow. As a result, the veggie box can be dominated with root vegetables and only one or two variety of fruits (compared to summer when the diversity of fruit and vegetables is amazing). This means that we have to be creative

What I like most about the WOC are the intangibles that keep it going.

in the way we cook, coming up with new ways of cooking potatoes, carrots, onions, or pumpkins. It is during these times that I feel closer to the rhythms of nature and this

assists me to appreciate the complexity of the seasons and God's creation.

While I have always been interested in gardening, this has now blossomed and my wife and I now preserve fruit from our own fruit trees, have a vegetable garden, and are raising Hugo and Jasper to care for the environment around them.

In particular, being part of the food coop has helped me:

- Live my faith out in practical ways.
- Reflect on how I relate to God's creation and how my food choices impact the earth.
- Share economics and life with others.

As Dom and I continue to work out how to reduce our impact on the earth, sometimes we fail miserably. But I am inspired by belonging to a group of people who are continuing to think about how they consume and what they consume. In short, while the food coop is one small step. It is one step that a community of people are taking together. For me, that is where its strength and beauty lies.

For information on how to set up your own food co-operative go to www.organicfoodcoop.org.au

A DIFFERENT WAY

A week-long exploration of Christ's call to a new way of living
9-15 November 2013



Come and spend a week exploring Christian alternatives in areas of money, employment, consumption, sustainability, family, community, care for creation and serving the poor. The week will be split between time in country Victoria and inner-city Melbourne, hanging out with a couple of Christian communities exploring a new way of living. Come and get your hands dirty!

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

- Study the Bible together
- Reflection and discussion
- Get your hands dirty
- Meet interesting people
- Cook and eat together
- Sing & pray

THINGS YOU WILL DISCUSS

- Vocation & employment
- Family & parenting
- Hospitality & the poor
- Shared living
- Community
- Money & budgeting

THINGS YOU WILL EXPLORE

- Growing food and making compost
- Ethical shopping
- Stewarding energy and water
- Waste
- Land care and restoration
- Global connections

Cost: \$100

Registrations close 26 October. Places will be limited, so hurry!

To download registration forms or for more info, check the website:

www.mannagum.org.au





(continued from front page)

Our major news is that Manna Gum's base of operations will be shifting to Bendigo next year. We (the Cornford family) have decided to move to the suburb of Long Gully to join in the good work at St Matthew's church begun by the Seeds Bendigo community. We have been discerning this move for some years now, and feel that the time has now come. Although this will be a big change for our family, not much will change on the Manna Gum front. We will continue to do the same sort of things, including doing things periodically in Melbourne and elsewhere.

We will perhaps write some more about our decision to move at a later date, but for now we just wanted to stress that we are not moving to the country! Bendigo is a regional city with a population over 100,000 and a social geography that

is typical of suburban Australia. Not that we have anything against moving to the country (we considered it ourselves), however, we have come to realise that at the heart of Manna Gum's ministry is the need to explore Christian alternatives in urban/suburban Australia, because that is where 90% of the population lives.

In other news, the main activity of the past few months, other than writing, has been running Household Covenant Bible study series, at the All Saints Anglican Church in Greensborough in Term 2, and currently at Ringwood Church of Christ. The serious engagement of these groups continues to confirm our sense that there is a growing hunger for a much closer integration of faith and the rest of life.



The logo of St Matthew's Church in Long Gully. This logo is derived, with kind permission, from a painting by local Aboriginal elder, Robyn Davis. She writes: 'People are drawn to the Long Gully, some are different and disconnected. They come from near and distant places, some from over the waters. The Bendigo creek meanders almost unseen and silent through and under the gully. The gully is a place of meeting and connection, the people re-connect. Gully life is community. Community born of the coming together from all parts of the world.'

MANNA GUM seeks to live within the economy of God – frugally, ethically and through the generous sharing of abundance within the community of faith. If our work resonates with you, please consider becoming a financial supporter.

- I would like to make a donation to MANNA GUM.
- I would like to become a regular financial supporter of MANNA GUM

Name: _____

Address: _____

State: _____ Postcode: _____

Email: _____

CONTRIBUTIONS per month once off donation

Amount: \$20 \$30 \$50 \$100 Other \$ _____

Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT)* **Cheque/Money Order**
 BSB: 633 000 A/c No. 134 179 514 (payable to *Manna Gum Initiatives Inc.*)
 A/c Name: *Manna Gum Initiatives Inc.*

* We can send you information on how to set up an EFT.

Support the work of MANNA GUM



About Manna Gum

Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. Provide resources for Christian groups to understand and practise the social, economic and political implications of the Gospel of Christ; and
2. Stimulate critical thinking on issues of aid and development, poverty and wealth, and to undertake research and advocacy on matters concerning Australian aid and development involvement overseas.

Please contact us if you would like more information about our work or to find how we could support you and your group/organisation to explore some of these issues.

www.mannagum.org.au

**Post to MANNA GUM, 14 Essex Street, Footscray VIC 3011,
call 0468 967 131 or email us at jonathan@mannagum.org.au**