

Are Boycotts Biblical?

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Article for Roots

A Brief History

Captain Charles Boycott (1832-1897) was an Irish land agent who became infamous for being ostracized by his community. In 1880, after renters had refused to pay their fees, Boycott served them eviction notices. But the community revolted, insisting Boycott's employees quit. Blacksmiths, postal workers, farmers, and shopkeepers ignored him until he agreed to leave the country. This social excommunication nearly ruined him financially.

Soon, the term "boycott" came to mean withdrawing from commercial or social relations as a form of punishment or protest. By 1888, "boycott" was in The Oxford English Dictionary, as there was no other word in English to describe such a dispute. "Boycott" has since wormed its way into other languages, including Dutch, French, German and Russian.

Recently Nigerians considered boycotting a milk company for insensitive remarks they made about the death of Christ. Boycotting is not new to Africa. During the 1970s and 80s, countries around the world boycotted South African goods to oppose apartheid. This is not only a Christian issue. Today, the Muslim association UUCSA is calling on South Africans to boycott Jewish-owned companies like Dis-Chem. The pro-Palestine organization BDS is encouraging South Africans to boycott Puma for sponsoring the Israel Football Association.

How should Christians think about boycotting immoral businesses? Is boycotting biblical? Consider the following six principles.

Key Principles

First, the desire to stay away from businesses that support sinful behavior often comes from a noble effort to obey Scripture. Ephesians 5:11 says, "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness." James 4:4 says, "Friendship with the world is enmity with God." Many Christians think that boycott is striving to obey these verses.

Second, it is impossible for Christians to dissociate themselves from every immoral person in this world. 1 Corinthians 5:9-10 says, "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters since then you would need to go out of the world."

Paul said that if a professing Christian and member of your church was living sinfully, such that he was excommunicated, you ought not associate with him—even to the point of avoiding meals together. But separating from some immoral people doesn't mean avoiding all immoral people, otherwise one would have to leave Earth altogether. We're not to be of the world but we must remain in the world.

Third, we must never violate our conscience as we interact with an immoral society. Romans 14 teaches that when it comes to grey areas, we must always act so that we are "convinced in our own mind" (14:5). If it violates your conscience to buy where alcohol or pornography is sold, or from a company that gives

subsidies to non-Christian organizations, don't shop there. If it doesn't, you are not obligated to boycott the company.

Fourth, giving money to the wicked doesn't necessarily make us culpable. Flying an airline that supports Marie Stopes or Planned Parenthood doesn't mean we are guilty of the millions of babies murdered in the womb. Both Jesus in Matthew 22 and Paul in Romans 13 urged Christians to pay their taxes, even though they knew that money would go to the Roman government which supported sinful behavior, including the crucifixion of the Son of God. Therefore, if we are not to blame for the way the government uses our taxes, we cannot be guilty when the hardware store uses the cash we paid them for the building of mosques in the community.

Fifth, boycotts—while not morally required—may be a good strategy. True, a boycott's effectiveness is mixed at best. But it could be helpful. The chief means to move a society toward righteousness is the gospel and the preaching of God's Word from church pulpits. Secondary methods include political reform and, yes, even occasional boycotts.

Suppose Store A and Store B both sell lawnmowers. Store A flies the rainbow flag for Pride month, but Store B doesn't. It's not sinful to buy a lawnmower at Store A but opting to go to store B could be a good tactic. The Christians in town don't like sodomy on display for their kids. If all the Christians in town encouraged each other to buy their lawnmowers at Store B, this would hurt Store A's pocketbook and could force him to shut down his business or stop promoting his perversion. This is a matter of steering, not separation. This same strategy could be applied to thousands of companies (but doesn't necessarily have to), such as Apple, Nike, Disney, Burger King and Netflix.

Finally, Christians may participate in our fallen world's economy but may not overtly celebrate sinful activity with their purchases. Christians may buy pajamas at stores that sell Pride T-shirts, but they may not buy Pride T-shirts. A Christian may bake a birthday cake for a homosexual, but he may not bake a wedding cake for a homosexual couple. A Christian may fix the gearbox for the CEO of a brothel but may not design brochures for a brothel.

As you can see, living in a sinful world can get complicated. What about Christians who work at Muslim-owned businesses? Wouldn't a boycott hurt your brother in Christ as well? Does the effectiveness of a boycott matter? And what about an upright middleman who sells products from an immoral company? Should he be boycotted too?

Conclusion

Christians may do business with non-Christians and are not morally obligated to boycott companies that endorse sinful behavior. It is important to approach each situation with prayer and biblical wisdom as we seek to be salt and light in a fallen world.