

Discussion Paper – Fast Food

He is Heavy, He's my Brother – Why Fast Food is not a good investment.

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Summary Position

While permissible, Fast Food companies are often involved in improper marketing of their product, particularly to young children. Christian Super will avoid, where possible, investing in companies that derive more than 5% of revenue from sale of fast food products.

1. Introduction

It was the 19th century materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach who said ‘Man is what he eats’. He argued that the Irish had not had a revolution because they ate too many potatoes making them dull and heavy. Hence he coined the slogan: ‘Beans for the revolution! Beans for the revolution!’ Today there is little doubt that most people in the West, including Australia, and especially young people, still eat too many potatoes, especially chips, and burgers and other forms of fast food. This paper aims to explain by reference to our 3 Cs framework and the previous paper on alcohol ‘All Things are Permissible, but not Everything is Profitable’, why it is not profitable for our brother or sister or ethical for us to invest in the fast food industry (or alcohol), even though the occasional Big Mac, or alcoholic drink, is not a sin.

2. Commands and Principles

In using our 3 Cs framework of Commands, Character, Consequences, we need to recognise that behind specific commands lie broader principles. Our positive principles of investment include stewardship of life and health and non-investment in anything addictive. In 1 Cor 6:12-20 and 10:23-4 Paul quotes from and then corrects the Corinthian strong and wealthy: In doing so he gives us three pertinent principles:

- “Everything is permissible for me” (strong Corinthians) – 1. but not everything is beneficial (Paul).
- “Everything is permissible for me” (strong Corinthians) – 2. but I will not be mastered by [addicted/enslaved to] anything (Paul).
- “Everything is permissible for me” (strong Corinthians) – 3. ‘Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others’.

3. Character and Story

Principles and commands are compressed or summarised stories from which we derive our character. The Corinthians who advocate complete individual freedom on the Greek dualist (and western) story that what you do with the body has no influence on your free soul or spirit because ‘food [is] for the stomach and the stomach for food and God will destroy them both’. Therefore what you do with your body – whether eating idol meat or sex with prostitutes doesn’t matter as the body will be destroyed.

Paul tells a different story – of salvation history. He sets our bodies in the context of Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Pentecost.

- Good Friday: ‘You are not your own; you were bought at a price’.
- Easter Sunday: ‘the body is not meant for [sexual] immorality but for the [risen] Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?’.

- Pentecost: ‘your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? Therefore honour God with your body’ (vv13-15, 18-20).

Paul applies this to sex with prostitutes but in principle it applies to all bodily activities – in fact the Corinthians use the food analogy. Our bodies are not our own but belong primarily to the crucified, risen and now Spirit of the Lord. And our bodies ‘belong’ secondarily to each other as members of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12). We represent the resurrected Lord and the Church with our bodies, both in the way we eat and have sex. If these activities take place in an idolatrous or addictive context or way (e.g. prostitution or eating idol meat) we need to be willing to compromise our freedom because our bodies belong to Christ and influence others (e.g. prostitutes and addictive/idolatrous eaters) – remember ‘I will not be mastered by anything’ and implicitly, not cause others to be. Sex with prostitutes is an out and out sin – eating idol meat outside of the context of a temple may not be, unless it tempts another Christian to fall back into it, and eating a burger, unless part of a gluttonous lifestyle, certainly is not.

This brings us back to our issue re alcohol. If it is not wrong for an individual to drink alcohol or eat burgers and other fast food, how is it wrong to invest in it? The applicable principle as with alcohol is not what is profitable for us but profitable/beneficial for them, especially for those who are weak or not well off intellectually, maturity-wise and materially, i.e. not knowledgeable or able to make an informed choice to exercise their liberty in moderation so they are not mastered or addicted. This is crucial given the fast food industry’s:

- targeting of the young (note the tie-ins to toys and entertainment, though see ‘Unhappy Ending for Disney’ article on this site as Disney does not now want to be associated with a product producing child obesity). This is particularly significant given Christian Super’s many clients from Christian schools and the questions it raises for their canteen and tuck-shop practices;
- admitted targeting the poor (cf cigarettes) as wealthier, better-informed groups and nations (with bigger health-care budgets) begin to disdain fast food. McDonalds in the US has seen a 33% increase over three years due to its ‘dollar menu’ aimed at poorer customers;
- bad labour (see Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, Penguin 2001 ch. 3 ‘Behind the Counter’ and ch. 8 ‘The Most Dangerous Job’), health (ch. 9 ‘What’s in the Meat’) and environmental practices (complicit in destruction of the world’s lungs in the Amazon forests, Schlosser, 133-5, 261-2, 268) violating our principle of relative parity or equality in labour and environmental relations.

4. Consequences and Purposes

The initial suggestion to place a ban on investment in fast food (with a toleration of 5% incidental investment) came not from me, but from others, by extension from the argument concerning the severe social consequences of the alcohol epidemic in our society. It is argued that we face something similar concerning obesity and fast food.

This is not an extremist argument as there has been considerable public debate in recent times, and Disney is hardly a radical organisation. A recent AC Nielsen poll for Sanitarium found 61% of respondents ate takeaway that week, with hot chips (24%), hamburgers (19%), and meat pies (19%) topping the menu. Health Minister Tony Abbott (‘A Plan to Win the Battle of the Bulge’, SMH, 10/5/06, 15) writes of a western ‘obesity epidemic. About one in five of our adults and one in 12 of our children are obese. Over half of adults and about a quarter of children are overweight. Obesity rates have doubled in the last two decades. Australians are the world’s fourth-fattest people, after Americans, Mexicans and Britons’. So much for the bronzed Aussie lifesaver myth! ‘Excess weight is

a key factor in heart disease and strokes, diabetes and back and joint problems, and can lead to a range of psycho-social difficulties. An estimated 7000 Australians a year die from obesity induced cardiovascular disease. To put it bluntly, twenty of us die a day simply from being too fat'. The US Centres for Disease Control recently estimated one in three American children born in 2000 will develop diabetes. The fast food industry has moved fast to insure itself against possible legal consequences. 'Almost twenty American states have now passed cheeseburger laws, rendering restaurants immune from obesity lawsuits'. However, even conservative companies like Disney are sensitive to their public image and stakeholder and investor opinion.

Because of this Mr Abbott is advocating clear, frontal and large labelling of calorie content of foods rather than them being hidden on the rear of packaging in small print. 'This offers people a much greater possibility of making real informed choices', he says. 'People need to know that a large Big Mac meal contains 1080 calories' of an average adult's 2500 needed per day and a child's 1800. The fast food industry is resisting however, claiming it is being victimised and that his proposal will make no difference.

Mr Abbott in my view and that of many, however, does not go far enough because he is unwilling to ban fast food advertising aimed at children. He claims that 'Sweden and Quebec have banned food ads in children's viewing hours for more than a decade with no discernable impact on childhood obesity. The problem is not what people watch but what they eat.' However, this is simplistic. The levels of obesity might have increased without the bans, levels of activity and exercise may have gone down, and fast food companies would not be putting billions into advertising aimed at children if it did not work. Advertisers deliberately use the 'pester power' of children to wear down overworked, time-poor parents. They implant messages in children's very 'plastic', pliable brains, when they don't have the critical faculties to make informed choices. Certainly parents have a responsibility, but so do corporations and advertisers and government regulators.

4.1 Is a Ban on Investment in McDonalds and co. radical?

For those who think a 'ban' on investing in fast food represents a radical perspective I understand, but beg to differ. The concern with fast food is now mainstream. Note the popularity of Morgan Spurlock's 2004 documentary *Supersize Me*. Schlosser, author of the 1.4 million best seller *Fast Food Nation* (now a movie being shown at Cannes) is no extremist – he's not a meat-hating vegetarian 'and sometimes even eats a burger'. He is a graduate of John McPhee's famous Princeton non-fiction writing course, the Literature of Fact. His new book *Chew on This* (Penguin, out in July) focuses on the industry's relations with its youngest customers. It asks: 'Should McDonald's be allowed to sell trans-fat-laden cheeseburgers to adults? Absolutely. Should they be able to market them to toddlers on TV? Absolutely not. You can't market alcohol to children, or cigarettes. Or guns. So how is it these companies are allowed to market this food in schools, for example?'

To the argument that withdrawal of investment doesn't work one only has to look at the effect of the way the growth in popularity of organic and healthy foods has forced McDonalds to start promoting its 'healthier' salads and low-carb sandwiches, yoghurts and herbal-teas and the industry has introduced stricter animal welfare standards. Disinvestment has similar effects.

Richard Morrison ('Fast to Fry the Golden Arches', *The Australian* 14/1/05, 13) has recently defended McDonald's against what he sees as unreasonable demonisation. 'McDonald's feeds families who can't afford to eat out anywhere else. It provides jobs for kids who can't get work anywhere else. And yes, it makes super-size profits but at least some of those riches have been ploughed back into the welfare of ordinary people [e.g. Ronald McDonald House]. When [founder Ray] Kroc's widow died [in 2004] ... she left \$US 1.5 billion (\$1.9 billion) to the Salvation Army'.

‘Yet in the eyes of McDonald’s vast army of enemies ... the ubiquitous golden M has come to symbolise something far more sinister than a burger chain. To liberal Europe it stands for American cultural imperialism at its most coercive. To anti-capitalists, it epitomises the frightful power of the multinationals. To trade unionists, it represents autocratic managers riding roughshod over cowed workers. To environmentalists it means the wanton destruction of natural resources and reckless production of more garbage. To animal welfare campaigners, it signifies all that is vilest about slaughterhouse farming. And to nutritionists, their prescriptive tendencies encouraged by the media panic about obesity, it offers an irresistible target for wrath and heavy-handed satires such as *Supersize Me*.

The result? McDonald’s has become our favourite corporate scapegoat ... But if we really wanted to stop teenagers getting fat, we would make them walk to school, wean them off watching four hours of telly a night and encourage them to exercise daily. To do that, however, would require an unprecedented display of parental willpower from the public and courage from politicians. Far easier to blame our social ills on a burger chain, just because it’s ... American and very slick at what it does’.

Yes, it is easy to demonise McDonald’s, but in advocating withdrawal of investment we are not isolating them. A ban on investment would affect Burger King (Hungry Jack’s) and others also. McDonald’s and their 150 million customers a day are merely the most obvious part of the fast-food industry which is a major part of a serious social and health problem – the epidemic of obesity. Certainly parents, governments etc need to do more to control children’s over-use of fast food. Certainly McDonald’s and others have made some moves in the right direction. Has it been enough, given the scale of the social and health problem they have made a major contribution to? No. Could we change our position and invest in McDonald’s and co. if their practices continue to improve and fattening fat food is no longer their primary product and promotion. Yes. Should the Salvation Army have rejected the donation from Kroc’s widow as they rejected a multi-million dollar donation from Tattersall in Australia. No, not in my view, as eating fast food isn’t directly wrong like gambling. The gift was presumably not at the Sallies initiative, whereas investing in McDonald’s would be at Christian Super’s.

I return to Paul and the Corinthians. Fast food is analogous in some ways to alcohol – both are substances and products that are not directly wrong for mature individuals making informed choices to use. However, in a world of idols and addictions we have to seriously consider the broader, multiplier effects of our actions, particularly in mass-production, mass-marketing societies which almost inevitably produce addictions amongst a considerable proportion of the population, especially the weak, vulnerable and young. Companies that primarily target these individuals with a view to producing addictive behaviour damaging to their health euphemistically known as ‘brand loyalty’ should not be invested in. ‘Hoping that nostalgic childhood memories of a brand will lead to a lifetime of purchases, companies now plan “cradle-to-grave” advertising strategies. They have come to believe what Ray Kroc and Walt Disney realized long ago – a person’s “brand loyalty” may begin as young as the age of two. Indeed, market research has found that children often recognize a brand logo before they can recognize their own name’ (Schlosser, p. 43).

Christian Super’s association with the Christian School movement and its strong concern for children should give us pause before we would invest in the fast food industry, a major cause of the obesity epidemic in our society. It is also a way in which can protest against those who aim to get children as young as two to find their identity or name in logos not the Logos (word) who created the world and became flesh. Ray Kroc, McDonald’s founder, has been widely quoted as saying ‘I believe in God, the family and McDonald’s hamburgers – and when I go to the office, I reverse the order’. When God, the family, and especially children, are used as mere means to sell more burgers, idolatry inevitably leads to addiction and exploitation of the vulnerable. It has led also to what sociologist George Ritzer

described in his book *The McDonaldization of Society*. This has happened particularly through soulless, unthinking, industrialised forms of labour, entertainment and education. A protest against the fast food industry's involvement in a major health problem of our society can also be a radical protest on a wider front. 'Man is what he eats', but we, and our children, are much more.

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