

Caught in the Middle: Christian Investors^[1]

Reading Harold Alkema's "To buy or to boycott: Tough moral choices for Christian consumers and investors" (June 24) sent me back a few decades to the early 1970s. My wife and I were Christian Reformed missionaries in Nigeria, while the country was in its chaotic civil war known as the Biafran War. An important actor in that war was the Shell Oil Company, whom the media kept accusing of playing the two sides off against each other for its own benefit.

A few years prior to that, we had paid off our student loans and found ourselves with some extra money that we decided to invest in a mutual fund. This was all new to us, but we wanted a little adventure. Then, when the media began to accuse Shell, we were shocked to find ourselves in a compromised situation. Here we were in the country as missionaries, but we also had a hidden presence in Shell via that mutual fund. There was no way we could find out the truth or otherwise of the accusations – or so we thought. Besides, our share was so infinitesimally small that we had no clout to challenge the company in any way. If our Nigerian colleagues and friends should ever find out about that secret presence of ours, we would have been terribly ashamed of this severe contradiction in our lives. We promptly sold our shares and lost most of our investment. Well, we deserved it, jumping into the fray as we did without any serious thought or, I must admit, serious prayer. We felt relieved to be freed from this contradiction.

Terrible contradiction

However, that was not the end of the road for us. I could not forget this incident; it stayed with me. I mulled over it, sometimes deep into sleepless nights. It slowly dawned on me that millions of Western Christians are in the same boat, investing in all kinds of companies without having any idea whether their investments are a blessing or a curse among the people where they are put to work. We only look at the bottom line. The blacker that line, the happier we are.

Being a writer by nature, after much struggle within myself and, yes, much serious prayer this time, I decided to write a book on the subject to help Christians develop some clarity on what they were doing and to raise consciousness of these issues. I ended up with a book entitled *Caught in the Middle: Christians in Transnational Corporations* (1992).

The Introduction paints the terrible contradiction deeply embedded in the Christian community of an actual situation in the CRC. An American fruit

^[1] CC, 23 Sept/2013, p. 5. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 4, p. 154. Though this is indeed mostly the article as it appeared in CC, I did take the liberty of a little editing, some updating and even adding a postscript.

corporation, Monsanto I believe it was, had made a deal with the Marcos government of the Philippines to take over a large acreage of fertile agricultural land to grow pineapples. The local farmers were forced to move to an area less fertile and with other types of soil to which they were not accustomed. They began a downward spiral of impoverishment so that the young people left to find their fortunes in cities. However, they had no skills for their new environment so that a large percentage got into all kinds of mischief. CRC agents noticed their plight and started programs to teach them skills to help them make their way. So far, so good.

Bizarre cycle

However, I wondered why these missionaries (not CRC mission Board staff) did not go to the root of the problem by challenging the corporation. When I wrote a letter to the agency about this, they responded that if they were to make such moves they would soon be deported from the country. In other words, they played it safe by presenting a superficial Gospel that avoided questions of injustice. What alternatives did they have? Well, that could be another article I am willing to write if requested.

The resulting scenario was that Christians in North America who invested in that company, would derive an annual dividend from that scene and tithe on that dividend to their churches. These churches in turn then sent, prayed for and paid for their emissaries to make this unjust situation palatable for its victims without challenging the company either at home or in the Philippines. Do you recognize the contradiction? It may be strange, but it is not fiction. It's pitiful, especially because it is not an isolated case. An attempt to explain the situation from the pulpit led to accusations of politicizing the Gospel on my part. Space prevents me from including that story.

Enquire and challenge

The beginning of Alkema's article struck me with particular force, for his opening paragraphs deal with the United Church of Canada (UCC). When I began my research, it took me some time to locate Christian documents dealing with the issue. The first one I found was published by the same UCC. After looking so hard and long for Christian documentation, I actually shed tears of joy and gratitude for that fine UCC publication. I never did find any CRC documents to help guide me.

When the book finally was published, it was not welcomed by the CRC establishment in Grand Rapids. In fact, the Nigeria mission director was asked to convey to me their unhappiness for this publication. Since the entire project

had been developed totally in private time and with private funds, there was not much they could do about it.

Though the book did not get the attention it deserved, it was distributed widely enough that even during the past few years I still get requests for it from researchers. For this reason, herewith (2015) it is available on the website and thus available free of charge to all the world.

I have the impression that the CRC establishment has become more sensitive to these issues, but feel free to enquire from them and, if need be, to challenge. Remember one thing: When you criticize corporations, you are criticizing your family, friends and neighbours who invest in them – and possibly yourself and your denomination.

Postscript

The Grace in the Title

The title of the book under discussion is, as you already know, *Caught in the Middle*. This title is a very gracious one, for it is not really true that investors are caught in the middle as if they were helpless victims in the situation. In every other situation we think carefully before we commit sizable funds to anything in our lives, whether house, car, vacation, boat, etc. However, when we commit our funds to investment vehicles, we hardly ask any questions beyond security and potential profit. We don't ask whether the funds we commit will be a blessing to whatever community they are expected to benefit from the investment.

This is a completely irresponsible attitude for people who claim to be stewards of God's resources. Because of it, we end up in situations of negative compromise and, worse, oppression of all sorts. We carefully shield ourselves from this awareness by not asking any questions or by claiming ignorance of complicated and distant situations. From here on, you are deprived from any such excuse and pretense. It is all laid out in bare bones for you.

We are *not* caught, we are *not* helpless victims; we decide, we enter into, we are active, we participate in unjust situations and make people suffer. And then, with our profits we tithe to send missionaries and aid workers to help the victims of our own actions. Can you think of a more outrageous contradiction than that?

A personal confession: I am not wholly free from this contradiction either!