

# What Would Jesus Wear?

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Thanks to Billy Jackson and others who helped to organize this Consumer Awareness Symposium at BYU.

In spite of our professed religious and ethical values, BYU is about the last university in the country to hold such an event for raising awareness of multinational corporation abuses, exploitation of Third World workers, unsafe working conditions, child abuse, etc.

In His Biblical teachings, His life and His restored gospel, Jesus condemned money-changing, greed, abuses of power and exploitation of people. He emphasized the importance of righteousness, justice and principles of stewardship. He defended women, marginalized minorities and advocated the protection of children.

If He were here today, would He drive to campus in a \$100,000 gigantic, gas-guzzling Hummer? Or a \$50,000 luxury SUV made by Cadillac? Would He appear in a \$400 fancy suit made by villagers in China getting paid 14 cents/hour? Or an outfit sold by Abercrombie and Fitch, produced by poor workers in Saipan, a U.S. territory in the Mariana Islands, and marketed through sleazy sexually-explicit advertising? Could Jesus ever be comfortable in cheaper, casual clothing produced in sweatshops from Indonesia to El Salvador? While Gap's revenue exceeds \$13 billion a year, making it the largest clothing retailer in the U.S., its garment workers in Cambodia make a mere 21 cents/hour, well below the local living wage.

I venture to guess that today Jesus would wear simple, affordable clothing that is not extravagant, that was made by craftsmen who enjoy decent working conditions. They might be unionized in an effort to protect workers' rights and advocate participative managerial decision-making. Jesus would support businesses that don't endanger children, the "little ones," that he loved. He would not approve of companies that force working hours of 12-15 hours a day because such practices dehumanize the individual and break down the family.

Thus, Jesus might not support U.S. retailing company, Ann Taylor. Its workers in Central America are forced to labor 13-15 hours a day, making a mere 60 cents an hour, less than the legal minimum wage. In China, its women workers grind away on machines for an hourly rate of 14 cents. Meanwhile, Ann Taylor enjoys annual sales of \$1.4 billion, profits of \$52.4 million, and the CEO takes home a compensation package of \$3 million a year.

## **Cases of MNC Abuse**

Below is a list of just a few examples of corporate human rights abuses, exploitation-level wages, dangerous working conditions, etc.

- Siberian factory workers making J.C. Penney products receive only 11 cents an hour.

- 47 employees died in a Bangladesh sweatshop fire because management had chain-locked the doors.
- Dominican Republic garment workers are caught in a race to the economic bottom.
- Wal-Mart uses illegal Eastern European immigrants for late-night custodial work in the U.S.
- Gap fires Central American employees who attempt to unionize.
- Since NAFTA was launched in the Maquiladora sweatshops of Mexico, 20 percent more families live below the country's official poverty line.
- Last year 2 Indonesian workers were shot and 30 arrested in protests against Nike, Reebok and other U.S. companies.
- New Era, a U.S. firm that sells baseball caps, uses 12 year old workers in Bangladesh, working the 12-15 hours a day after which they take an hour to get home, receiving a mere \$2-3 for the day's work.
- Employees at a Banana Republic firm in Cambodia make only a dollar a day for 12 hours of labor, six days a week. The young, female teenagers don't receive sufficient monies for rent, clean water, food and/or medical treatment. Many have to go in debt just to make ends meet and send a little money home to their parents. Workers are not allowed to join a union to obtain better working conditions. The company has a code of conduct, but admits it is not fully enforced. Most workers are not aware of such a code.
- Target Corporation enjoys \$39 billion in annual revenue through its 1,300 U.S. stores. Yet its Gold Fame factories in Asia suffer from low pay, dangerous working conditions, and allegedly, shopfloor workers are not even allowed to look their supervisors directly in the face when spoke to. Workers frequently attempt to organize labor unions, but most are fired before their goal is reached.
- Bed and Bath, a subcontractor for Nike, Adidas, and Levis in Thailand, illegally closed its plant and disappeared without warning, still owing \$375,000 in back pay to several hundred workers. The company was being investigated for employee abuse, mandatory overnight shifts, and an allegation that managers laced the workers' drinking water with amphetamines to keep them producing hard during long nights of work.
- Disney subcontractors at the Shah Makhdum factory in Bangladesh, exploits employees who are allegedly beaten, forced to labor 14-15 hour shifts, seven days a week. Teenage workers are paid about a nickel to produce a \$17.99 Disney shirt.

Instances like these are but the tip of a giant iceberg that abuses Third World workers in the name of capitalism, American consumer demands, and globalization. Big business has lost its moral compass and abdicated its social responsibilities to workers, consumers and communities. So-called free trade hasn't worked over past decades. What we need is fair trade! U.S. executives have degrees from the Harvard Business School, and some are from BYU's Marriott School. But they act as though they attended the Korihor School of Management!

## **The Path to Change**

While many poor families around the globe are victimized by horrendous MNC abuses, we in the United States, especially we here at BYU, can push for change. What steps might we take to force corporate change? To improve business' ethical practices? To ensure fair trade?

1. Become aware
  - Watch for stories in the press
  - Investigate abuses
  - Check out stores on the web: [behindthelabel.org](http://behindthelabel.org); [newdream.org](http://newdream.org); [sweatshops.org](http://sweatshops.org)
2. Change our values as consumers
  - Stop demanding cheap products that require poverty-level wages
  - Push for quality, not quantity
  - Shift toward locally-owned, small-scale manufacturers rather than gigantic MNC
  - Practice LDS stewardship
3. Alter our purchasing habits
  - Ask where products are made
  - Don't buy items made in sweatshops
4. Mobilize for new legislation.
  - Lobby state officials to enact laws to protect immigrants from being exploited in surrounding area firms in Utah or your home state.
  - Write U.S. senators and congressional leaders to do the same at the federal level.
5. Start an anti-sweatshop club at BYU to build awareness, harness student power, pressure campus organizations to not purchase BYU-Logo items such as Nike's swoosh. Contact United Students Against Sweatshops for support ([www.usasnet.org](http://www.usasnet.org)).
6. Introduce these issues in church discussions, Sunday School lessons, mutual classes, etc. See what other religious groups are doing and apply some of their efforts to the LDS situation. Examples: Presbyterian groups who do letter-writing campaigns to CEOs; Church of the Brethren that has had a fair trade program since 1949; SERRV International ([www.serrv.org](http://www.serrv.org)).

7. Write Honors theses and Masters theses at BYU on research about Third World exploitation of workers.
8. Launch your own corporate campaign, or sign-up with an existing campaign. Examples include Worldwide Responsible Apparel Production (WRAP) [www.wrapapparel.org](http://www.wrapapparel.org); Social Accountability International ([www.sa-intl.org](http://www.sa-intl.org)); the UK group, Ethical Trading Initiative ([www.ethicaltrade.org](http://www.ethicaltrade.org)); and [www.fairlabor.org](http://www.fairlabor.org). All these groups advocate occupational safety, higher wages and benefits, workplace democracy, freedom of association, etc.
9. Encourage boycotts. Many universities and some cities have formal policies prohibiting the purchase of goods made by exploited workers (Yale University, Harvard, Stanford, the town of North Olmsted, Ohio, etc.).
10. Build the Fair Trade movement, not just Free Trade. Get local businesses to only sell Fair-Trade Certified products. (See [www.fairtradecertified.org](http://www.fairtradecertified.org).)
11. Encourage your parents and other investors to pressure MNCs in which they own stock. Have them write CEOs protesting abusive company practices, threaten to disinvest, pull out their stock holdings, etc. (Check out [www.communityinvest.org](http://www.communityinvest.org).)
12. Join the boycotts against Wal-Mart to protest low salaries, nonunion tactics, and products made in sweatshops. (Join [www.shareholderaction.org](http://www.shareholderaction.org) or [www.coopamerica.org](http://www.coopamerica.org).)
13. Take on prominent public figures whose companies use forced or prison labor, child workers, and so on. (Kathy Lee Gifford's handbags made in China/ P Diddy Combs [Puff Daddy] Sean John rap apparel made in Honduras.)
14. Support governmental efforts to counter child labor, Burmese working conditions, trafficking in women workers, and dangerous factories. These include USAID monitoring programs, U.S. Department of Labor initiatives, United Nations policies, international codes of conduct, etc.
15. Donate to alternative strategies being implemented by international NGOs that create small, worker-owned cooperatives, microcredit and village banking. These programs often generate better working conditions, higher wages, and worker-controlled enterprises that result in social and economic justice. (See [www.villagebanking.org](http://www.villagebanking.org), [www.grameen-info.org](http://www.grameen-info.org).)

## **The Patron Saint of LDS Consumers**

In wrapping up, I want to acknowledge the great example of a Mormon who essentially launched the consumer awareness movement in the United States: Who was it?

- J. W. Marriott?
- Larry Miller?
- Jon Huntsman?
- Orrin Hatch?
- Ralph Nader?

Nope, it was a woman, Esther Peterson.

- Born in Provo, Utah, descendant of Danish pioneer converts
- Graduate, BYU, 1927
- Masters Degree, Columbia University
- Drawing on her LDS values she became a voice for the underdog
- Joined the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union in the 1930s
- Later became a lobbyist for the AFL-CIO in Washington, DC.
- 1961 appointed Assistant Secretary of Labor by President JFK.
- Later created the first presidential commission on women, and got Eleanor Roosevelt to originally head it
- Married Oliver Peterson and they raised 4 children
- Became a consumer rights advocate
- Appointed Special Assistant to the President (LBJ) for Consumer Affairs in the 1960s.
- She essentially launched the consumer movement in America.
- Her many initiatives include such things as putting laundry instructions on clothing, unit pricing in grocery aisles, worker safety, and truth in packaging laws.
- Was consumer advisor to President Jimmy Carter in the 1970s.
- She was U.S. representative to the United Nations.
- She fought so hard for consumer rights that the Advertising Federation of America called her "the most dangerous thing since Genghis Khan!"
- Esther convinced the United Nations to create Consumer Protection Guidelines that help to pass consumer laws in nations around the world.
- In 1985 at age 78 she founded the United Seniors Health Cooperative to increase access for poor, elderly Americans to health and consumer services.
- Esther was an activist all her life

In her autobiography, *Restless*, she declared: "I am an old lady in my ninth decade of life, and I believe I still have a lot to give. You don't have to stop contributing when your hair turns white, in fact you may have more to give if you're able to build on your experiences and your past." She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1981. Esther passed away in Washington D.C. on December 20, 1997. Esther Peterson was a woman who touched many lives with her service to humanity. I would like to propose that we acknowledge her as the patron saint of Mormon consumerism. BYU should honor her with an annual event like this one today, so let's call this the Esther Peterson Consumer Awareness Symposium!

## **Conclusion**

I believe that Esther would be appalled at the low-life practices used by today's MNCs with their low wages, dangerous, even toxic factories, child labor, and exploitation of women workers. To honor her memory I propose we conclude with the following points:

1. What we consume matters. We need to become more enlightened as to how our personal shopping preferences may reinforce Third World labor exploitation.
2. Further awareness will help to reduce damaging but hidden environmental costs and tremendous human costs as well.
3. We need to talk the talk, but also walk the talk, and take action.
4. Socio-economic gospel teachings are clear. First Presidency concerns: growing inequality between rich and poor, exorbitant corporate profit, unethical executives, and, as President Spencer W. Kimball put it, the need for business owners to not pay as little as they can get away with, but to “pay top dollar” to one’s employees.
5. We need to practice the law of consecration and stewardship here and now, not just waiting to do so at some distant point in the future.

Thank you very much!