

World Hunger —the Religious Connection

Mark O. Hatfield

Martin Niemoller, a German pastor, experienced what he called his "second conversion" while imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II. Niemoller had so despised the atrocities of the Hitler regime that he came to hate the prison guard who brought him his food each day. Seeing the Nazi insignia on his uniform, all the indignation and outrage Niemoller felt toward that evil system was directed against that guard. Then one day Niemoller suddenly realized that Jesus Christ died on the cross for that guard, that Christ loved him that much. Niemoller knew that he was bound to love that guard, and to love every man. The atonement of Christ took on a whole new meaning for Niemoller. Its implications were revolutionary.

Under the cross of Christ, which Paul says is foolishness to the world but the power of God to those who are being saved, we can understand the scope of God's love. When we grasp this love in the depths of our being, then we will avoid separating the message of the Gospel from its mission.

One of the tragedies of the Church today, which surely grieves the Holy Spirit, is the unbiblical separation we have made between verbal witnessing to the Good News of Christ and acting with his love to meet the needs of our fellow man. This is basic-

ly the schism between those who stress evangelism as opposed to "social gospel." You do not find such a division in the Scriptures. There is no such distinction in the life of Christ. It is a false dichotomy we have created; we must allow God to destroy it.

The message of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ is inseparable from the living witness of that love for others. "If you heed my commandments, you will dwell in my love," our Lord said (John 15: 10). If our lives have been truly touched by the miraculous, redeeming love of Christ, and if we are dwelling in that love, then we will be living forth the wholeness of the Gospel. Martin Niemoller suddenly realized that day that his Nazi prison guard, with all of the hatred and brokenness in his life, stood beneath the shadow of the cross. In the flow of God's love, message and mission become one; the Gospel is whole.

In our one-to-one relationships we must discover ever anew the miracle of that love which pours itself out, purely for the sake of the other, abandoning the self. This is the love which strives to see each individual as God himself sees that person; with that same quality of love which led Christ from Gethsemane to Golgotha. In our marriage, with our families, with those in our churches, with those where we work, this is how we must strive to love and relate in our daily, face-to-face relationships.

But our love must not stop there. Christ calls us into a love that knows no boundaries other than the scope of human need. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we read again and again about God's focused compassion for those who suffer, who

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are poor, who are oppressed, who are in need. When asked, "Who is our neighbor?" you remember our Lord related the story of the Good Samaritan. Our neighbor was not simply the person next door, or our circle of close friends. He was anyone victimized by the world's pain and inhumanity. The closer we are to the cross, the more keenly we feel the pain and suffering of mankind everywhere.

We as Christians living in America must face one basic, startling reality about our world and its suffering: most of humanity is hungry. The most basic physical need of any of us is enough food simply to keep life going. Yet that is a daily struggle for millions of people—in other nations, and also right here in America. Each day literally thousands of fellow human beings lose that struggle, and die of starvation.

Christ is the Bread of Life. He gives us our own life, spiritually and physically. But if a man spends his waking hours struggling for enough physical bread to avoid starvation, there is little chance of his hearing the message of the Bread of Life. How can we dare share this message of Christ, the Bread of Life, with such a person without trying to fill his empty stomach with food?

Joseph interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh. There would be seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. And so one-fifth of all the grain was to be saved each year to provide for the lean years. As the prophecy came true, we read, "The whole world came to Egypt to buy corn from Joseph, so severe was the famine everywhere." The plenty of the harvest in Egypt was conserved, so that in the time of need Jacob, living in the distant land of Canaan, said to his sons, "I have heard that there is corn in Egypt. Go down and buy some so that we may keep ourselves alive and not starve."

Today our world stands on the brink of famine. Yet all the world knows that there are harvests of plenty in America. During the last seven years, however, we have not been as prudent as Egypt. Rather, farmers were paid not to grow crops on as much as one-seventh of our cropland, and grain was left to rot in silos. We have made real attempts to increase the harvests of other countries. But the number of bodies to feed has expanded more rapidly than food. Further, other forces that seem beyond our mortal control make current prophecies about seven lean years ahead grimly believable. Let me be candid. There is no problem faced by this world more likely to breed instability and conflict and increase the magnitude of mankind's suffering in the years directly ahead than the shortage of food. International politics, relationships between the "superpowers" and the poor countries, the durability of political regimes, and the political character of nations, including our own, will be shaped by the growing scarcity of the world's basic resources, especially

food, more than by any other factors that may claim our attention.

Before World War II most countries of the world had all the grain they needed, and frequently some to spare. Only Western Europe was dependent upon buying grain from other nations. Today much of the world needs grain, but only North America and Australia have substantial surpluses to export. The United States produces half of the world's corn and two-thirds of the world's soybeans. Out of 1.2 billion tons of grain produced by the world, 90 million tons is traded between countries, and the United States provides 70 million tons of that. Yet our present situation is that two-thirds of the world's population fights for one-third of the world's total protein. Recently we have put idle land into production and depleted our reserves. But the world demand has increased. Our long-standing surpluses are no longer there to provide a cushion against outright famine.

The shortage of energy worsens the shortage of food. With the increasing mechanization of farming, both here and abroad, it takes about eighty gallons of gas to raise an acre of corn. Far more is required to produce the fertilizer essential to the hoped-for "Green Revolution." Thus, while Americans waited in line a few hours for gas for their cars, Indian farmers waited in line for five days for gas to run their irrigation pumps and other machines needed to grow and harvest their crops.

More troubling is the report of some scientists who study the climate. They have ascertained that the world's temperature has dropped by 2.7 degrees since 1945 and that this apparent cooling trend will cause desert areas to advance toward the Equator, expanding the region of drought. We have already seen the effects of this in the Sahel region of Africa, where the Sahara has expanded southward thirty miles each year of the current drought. For the first time in memory, the Niger River can be crossed by foot. And at least 250,000 people have died from starvation. Continuing changes in climate such as this would affect India, South Asia, China, and Central America.

Changes in climate can also affect our own capacity for food production. Many of us have memories of the last major drought in the United States, of the "Dust Bowl." Scientists sense that dry periods come in cycles. They may be mild—as in the 1950's—or far more severe. What many predict is that the next drought period is due just about now and could last for five to six years. Even a slight reduction in harvests of grain from North America would have a devastating effect on a world fighting against famine. The seven lean years predicted by Joseph could be coming upon us now.

What must pierce our hearts as believers in Christ and instruments of His compassion is the monopoly on the world's food and protein enjoyed by us as

Americans. Each of us living in America consumes nearly a ton of cereal grains, the best basic food and form of protein, each year. But only about 150 pounds of this is consumed directly in the form of bread, pastry, or breakfast cereals. The remaining 1,850 pounds is consumed indirectly in the form of meats, and then milk and eggs. By contrast, an average person living in a poor country has only about 400 pounds of cereal grains to consume each year for his protein. This he must take directly in the form of grains, such as rice and wheat, for little or none can be spared for conversion into more costly and inefficient means of protein production such as meat.

An acre of land can produce varying amounts of protein, depending upon how it is utilized. If you plant soybeans, you will have a yield of about 667 pounds of protein. Corn will produce 435 pounds; rice yields about 323 pounds of protein; wheat gives forth about 227 pounds. But if you devote that land to feed for poultry and meat, look what happens. For chickens, an acre will give you about 97 pounds of protein. For raising pigs, one acre of land and its feed converts into 29 pounds of protein. Finally, for every acre of land in America devoted to raising beef, we yield a mere 9 pounds of protein. To put it another way, it takes about seven times as much grain to put protein on the table in the form of meat as it does to consume such cereal grains with an equivalent amount of protein in direct forms.

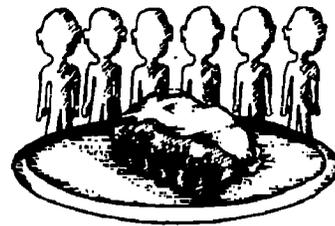
Add now these factors. The richer a country becomes, the more inefficient it becomes in its use of protein. Our per capita beef consumption has more than doubled since 1940, and our population has increased as well by 57 per cent during that time. As other countries have grown wealthier, such as Western Europe and Japan, their demand for meats has also risen. Thus more and more grain gets used in the most inefficient ways of protein production. Because of the way we have become accustomed to eating, it takes five times the limited resources of land, water, and fertilizer to support the diet of a Nigerian, or Colombian, or Indian, or Chinese. The amount of food and protein consumed by the diets of 210,000,000 Americans could feed 1.5 billion Africans and Indians on a stable, though vastly different, diet.

Our vast consumption of world energy resources is also directly related to the way we produce food. In a poor nation, or "primitive" culture, each "calorie" or unit of energy invested produces anywhere from 5 to 50 food calories. But in the rich nations it takes between 5 to 10 calories of energy to get just one food calorie. Apply that to just one country, to India. If all of India's 550 million people were to be fed at our level of 3,000 calories each day, it is estimated that that would require the expenditure

of more energy than India currently uses for all other purposes. On a larger scale, to feed the entire world on our diet would require 80 per cent of the world's total energy.

This means we can no longer suppose that our abundance can feed the hungry of the world. Rather, the world will be fed only by the sharing of resources which the rich of the world have assumed to be their unquestioned possession, and through the changing of values and patterns of life which the affluent have barely even questioned. Some have already warned that, with the fertilizer shortage alone, Asia may be faced this year with the largest food deficit of any region in recent history. The failure of the monsoons and a resulting poor harvest would almost insure famine. But even now, without those developments, over half of India's population (more than the total population of the United States) lives below the subsistence level, eating only one meager meal a day. Thus just the slightest deterioration of the status quo would mean starvation for hundreds of thousands, even millions.

At least 60 per cent of all those 2.5 billion people living in the poorer, developing world are malnourished. We have not even touched on how malnutrition leads to death through disease for millions of people. Even more tragic is the evidence that malnutrition during a mother's pregnancy and the first months of an infant's life can cause permanent damage to the mental abilities of the child.



Famine cannot be averted simply by increasing the "size of the pie" so that those who have little may have a little more. What we are discovering is that the pie itself has limits. Most all arable land around the globe is in use. Increased protein production once hoped for from the sea has not materialized, and now most scientists fear the seas are being "over-fished," which would deplete this resource. The simple truth, then, is that the "pie" must be shared more equitably. The world produces enough food to feed all its inhabitants. But when one-third of the world's population—all those who are comparatively the "rich"—consume two-thirds of the world's protein resources, then millions of the other two-thirds of the world suffer, starve, and die. Gandhi put it cogently: "The earth provides enough for everyman's need, but not for everyman's greed."

Faced with these realities, and filled with the compassion of Christ, what is our response? Above

all, we must allow our hearts to be made sensitive to the suffering of our fellow man. The facts and statistics must be translated into human realities which we can feel from deep within, into human realities which quicken our conscience. We should allow ourselves to feel uncomfortable about our wealth, our lifestyle, our diet, and all our subtle worship of affluence. We must let God's Spirit move us, even to convict us anew of sin, and to show us the ways of repentance and renewal.

Most of all, we must cast aside all those rationalizations that would somehow prevent us from understanding and reaching out to those who suffer. There are some who say that perhaps the worst will indeed come true, and that this only alerts us to the Second Coming of Christ. I do not want to get into a discussion about eschatology and the various doctrines about the last days which have been such a source of division among Christians. But let us be agreed about one central biblical truth: We are never told to sit by and watch the world destroy itself in its inhumanity and sin, we cannot console ourselves with the prediction that the end of all things must be just around the corner. To turn our back on the suffering of the world is to turn away from Christ himself. This is exactly what he has told us: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit in state on his throne, with all the nations gathered before him. He will separate men into two groups, as a shepherd separates sheep from the goats Then the king will say to those on his right hand, You have the Father's blessing; come, enter and possess the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made. For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers, however humble, you did for me" (Matthew 25:31-40).

Precisely because all history is consummated in him—because Christ is Lord over all—we must give our lives in his service to the world's need. In so doing, we are proclaiming and giving witness to his love and victory. We may believe that history will end in utter destruction before the New Jerusalem comes into being. But that should not deter us from ministering to the world's suffering and need any more than the knowledge of the eventual death of every person would lead us to abandon any ministry to sickness and disease.

Let no more be heard about people being poor or suffering because it is "God's will," and thus there is nothing we should do. It is God's will that "Every valley shall be exalted; every hill made low; the crooked made straight, and the rough places plain" (Isaiah 40:4). God's will was told in Mary's words, when the angel announced that she should give birth to Christ: "The hungry he has satisfied with

good things; the rich sent empty away" (Luke 1:53). Thomas Merton wrote: "It is easy to tell the poor to accept their poverty as God's will when you yourself have warm clothes and plenty of food and medical care and a roof over your head and no worry about the rent. But if you want them to believe you, try to share some of their poverty and see if you can accept it as God's will yourself!"

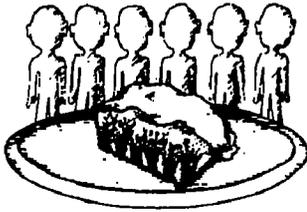
There is much we can do. First, there are the voluntary relief efforts which call for our participation and support; Christian groups like World Vision, and secular groups like CARE. But we are far beyond the point where a few dollars given once a year will be sufficient to fulfill our responsibility. Our talents and skills are called for. We can give them, voluntarily, to this mission. We can even take a year or two to go ourselves and help serve those in need.

While we are aware of worldwide hunger, it is easy and convenient to forget the hunger and suffering in our own hometown. In each of our cities, the gifts and potential of countless individuals are maimed in the earlier years of life because of a lack of food and protein. That is corporate sin in the eyes of God. If we are touched by Christ's spirit for those who are suffering and hungry, let us begin with our neighbor here at home and then let that compassion flow to all who suffer everywhere, for they are all our neighbors.

We can do more. Every congregation could establish a specific budget amount directed to meeting the needs of starving people in some particular point of the world. Christians can be asked to give a specific tithe just for the purpose of relieving hunger; further, we should consider a graduated tithe, which increases in its percentage according to the amount of one's income. "From those to whom much has been given, much will be expected." We should renew the Christian discipline of fasting as a way of teaching us to identify with those who hunger, and deepen our life of prayer for those who suffer. We must all analyze, in prayer before God, our own habits of food consumption. Specifically, we can drastically alter our consumption of meat, and the money we save we can give to alleviate world hunger. Some Christians may decide that part of their witness means being a vegetarian. Families can decide how to limit their consumption of beef, perhaps to only certain days, or at times of special celebration, or just on certain days of the week. This Thanksgiving can be a time when Christians throughout the land join to express their thanksgiving for our plenty, not by a feast but by a sacrificial sharing of our plenty with the needy, just as the Pilgrims shared with the Indians.

These are only suggestions. The point is that Christ's love beckons us to far more than simply charitable giving. He calls us to give in a way that

changes the shape of our lives. That love led him to the cross. And it will lead us, if we follow, to pour ourselves out for the sake of others.



Finally, how can we as a nation aid in mobilizing our wealth and resources to avert the threat of famine and to give hope to mankind? First, we must turn back to our history, realizing that we have responded with a generous heart and sacrificial spirit in the past to meet the needs of a hungry and starving world. When World War I broke out in Europe, and Germany occupied Belgium, it was the Committee for Relief in Belgium, headed by Herbert Hoover, which collected contributions from throughout the United States with private and governmental participation. At its height the relief committee was feeding ten million persons who otherwise faced starvation. When the United States entered the war, all its food resources were mobilized for the Allied cause. This mobilization continued after the war.

This work was genuinely humanitarian in its motivation, transcending all ideological lines. Invaluable service was rendered to Soviet Russia, which was in the grip of starvation following the war and their internal revolution. In Russia alone, it is estimated that the lives of seventeen million persons were saved from starvation. Some tried to introduce ideological considerations, but Hoover's view was simple, and should be ours today: "... above all, I did not believe that stunted bodies and deformed minds in the next generation were the foundation upon which to rebuild civilization."

We can speak and act today to influence the priorities and commitments of our nation. How the rich and prosperous nations of the globe exercise their stewardship will determine in large measure the destiny and future of mankind. This year in our national budget the Congress has been asked to approve the largest peacetime military budget in our history. Over \$90 billion dollars will be spent on weapons of destruction and for the support of our

armies, including over half a million men stationed permanently outside our border. This total of military expenditures amounts to 63 per cent of the funds Congress can actually control and is being asked to spend this year.

By contrast, all the funds proposed in this year's budget for the purpose of providing humanitarian and economic assistance to other nations and to disadvantaged people comes to \$1.9 billion. Much of this money, in my opinion, is utilized more to gain political influence than to relieve human suffering. This gives us some idea of how we as a nation are exercising the stewardship of our resources. It comes down to this: For \$1.00 that is spent in our nation's attempts to alleviate suffering and enhance human life throughout the world, we spend \$50.00 for the weapons and forces geared to the destruction of life.

Consider these facts in light of our own nation's security, and of the desire to build peace throughout the world. From where do the threats to peace come? What will be most likely to throw the world into turmoil and instability? It is the one central reality of world hunger. There is no security for a nation with only 6 per cent of the world's population using 40 per cent of the world's resources—unless that nation commits itself to the sacrificial service of the world's needs. No armies can provide security for a few who want to cling to their wealth amid a sea of those who are suffering, starving, and dying. Hostility, hatred, and mindless violence are bred by deprivation and suffering. Desperate people do desperate deeds, against which there is no real security. True security is built through justice and through the alleviation of human need.

Our responsibility as Christians is to call the nation to a rightful exercise of stewardship. The Bible makes it clear that a people will be judged on how they utilize the gifts given to them. We will be judged, then, on what we do with the abundance and wealth which are ours. As a nation we have this duty of stewardship over all our material, natural, and human resources. They can be used for life or for death; for our own selfish and wasteful consumption, or for the benefit of humanity.

For us as individuals stewardship means holding our own lives to the shape of the Man Crucified. It means being conformed not to the world, but to Christ. Our action, individually and corporately, can be light to our nation and to the world.