

THE FOOD BANK AS PROPHECY

A man standing on one mountain range can look across a vast valley and recognize the broad characteristics of another range. The highest mountain or the critical break in the range is often visible from that great distance, yet be impossible to find when one is in its shadow. God and history will not judge Mennonites in the latter half of the 20th century on the neatness of their organizations or on the division of authority and responsibility between national bodies or country directors. The great issues of our day will become crystal clear with the benefit of hindsight (or divine sight), and we will be tested to determine if we recognized the signposts and acted accordingly.

The outstanding issue will undoubtedly be whether we presented Jesus Christ to the world as God's solution to man's sin—which is the underlying cause of all of our other problems. There may be many problems in our world—but only two which will determine whether mankind will survive or not. These two are nuclear war and the ability of the world to feed itself. This does not mean that other issues such as refugees, treatment of minorities and handicapped etc. are not important—but they will not determine the survival of mankind.

There are many references to the future in the Bible, with varying shades of obliqueness. The prophecies in Revelation 8, however, are of a different nature. If stripped of their apocalyptic tone they could almost be considered plagiarism from the Club of Rome report.

Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.

The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water—the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.

A fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.

As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: 'Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!' Rev. 8: 6-13

The eagle, the condor, the pelican and similar birds are at the pinnacle of the inter-related family of life—and the accumulated deterioration of our world will destroy them first. Until DDT was banned a decade ago these birds were in fact approaching extinction!

The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.

Rev. 9:1-6

We live in a world where the neutron bomb is a reality! It kills people with minimal damage to the physical surroundings.

The sixth angel blew his trumpet "And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of man-kind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million....a third of mankind was killed by three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur...the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent..."

Finally the seventh angel acts. "Then there came flashes of lightening, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth...the cities of the nations collapsed...every island fled away and the mountains could not be found..." Rev. 16:17-21

We hardly need the book of Revelation to tell us about the destructions of our forests and grasslands, the pollution of our ocean and fresh water resources and the polluting of our fragile sky, from the ozone layer of acid rain.

We have ample biblical basis for environmental concerns—but the bottom line is that the accumulating deterioration of our physical world inexorably reduces its ability to feed and hold an ever-increasing population. Nuclear war may be triggered by many events, but the increasing pressure on nations to protect their resources and to gain access to those resources essential to their very survival will increasingly narrow the range of options available. According to Revelation, we will first experience a terrifying conventional warfare, but "mankind...still did not repent." Then the nuclear option will cause man to self-destruct. We are well along the path outlined in Revelation—the first four angels are blowing their trumpets hard and the fifth angel is tuning up.

There is accumulating evidence of an approaching global crisis in the ability of the world to feed itself. This evidence includes:

- loss of available land to development, erosion, desert, etc.
- increasing population and inability to stop its growth
- increasing damage to fresh water resources by excess utilization of groundwater and qualitative changes to surface water
- over-fishing of the oceans and pollution of large parts of the ocean
- air pollution which causes acid rain plus other effects
- increase in monoculture resulting in greater danger of widespread crop losses and a narrowing of genetic stocks
- only a handful of countries are self-sufficient on a net basis; only decades ago the majority could make that claim.

The solution to the impending food crisis (if there is a solution), will not be found in a single focus. The stress on self-sufficiency, reduced reliance on external energy and chemical sources, diversification of crops and seasons, new crops and techniques, control of water and soil resources will all be important. In addition there will need to be appropriate methods of maintaining international reserves and distributing them on some rational basis in times of need. It seems strange (if not hypocritical) that we preach self-sufficiency to every barren patch of real estate in the third world, yet many places like the State of New York or the Province of B.C. would starve in a week if their borders were sealed.

We need to speak to the question of food production, food distribution but also the issues referred to in Revelation 8—the destruction of the carrying capacity of our earth. President Jimmy Carter commissioned a study in 1977 to predict the kind of world the U.S.A. would be in by the year 2000. This has now been analyzed to determine the impact on Canada. The issues related to food were reviewed on CBC Radios Food Show on December 6, 1981. The report stressed that because Canada is and will remain the world's second largest food exporter...Canada will be in a unique position to exercise leadership in food policy. The report went on to assert that actual costs of producing food, over and above inflation, would double by the year 2000---with the result that food distribution would increasingly be determined by the ability to pay. The reviewer then made a statement that was shocking. He stated that "...the time will come when Canadians will determine who eats and who doesn't eat!"

The discussion then turned to what Canadians are doing to prepare themselves to deal with these increasingly difficult food policy issues. And the same questions should be asked of ourselves –what are we doing as a church to prepare ourselves, and our societies to deal with the policy questions which will determine the survival of other societies? The accumulating

experience by MCC in development is resulting in a growing cadre of experienced and sensitized church members and an ever-increasing understanding of the problems and opportunities related to food production in the third world. In times of crisis, however, development will not provide the short-term solutions. Therefore, we must also develop a similar expertise in all areas related to just and rational distribution of food. The Food Bank should be seen as the vehicle through which MCC and the church can gain that experience and develop the necessary credibility which is the basis upon which one speaks to policy issues. For example, Mennonites have a very powerful voice in refugee concerns at this moment if they choose to use it; not because their ideas are necessarily superior, but because the leadership in the sponsorship program has given the church great credibility. Similarly in the food policy question, our influence will be a function of our credibility more than the skill of our arguments.

Why should MCC worry about food policy issues when they may still be decades away? Jesus spoke to this issue by telling us a story about virgins and lamps. Recent developments in management theory also speak to the matter. Efforts to explain the various efficiency levels of different societies or the learning curve of the production of a complex product have been explained by the use of experience curves. The basic theory is that every time there is a doubling of accumulated production or GNP, there is a similar percentage reduction in costs or an increase in efficiency. Thus, in the early stages, progress will be more evident. Furthermore, a rapidly growing society, company, or product, will double its accumulated production more frequently and thus will proceed down its experience curve more quickly.

Another interesting aspect of this theory is that it works best for industries as opposed to individual companies or whole societies. The reason is that competitive pressures and the shift of personnel and techniques between companies maximize the learning process.

What application does this theory have to MCC, the Food Bank and food policy? It is my contention that our ability to speak with relevance and authority in 1990 or the year 2000 will be a function of our accumulated experience in the intervening period. The Food Bank will ship real food to real people in the present—but more than anything—it is important that we understand the grain industry, government system and policy—making processes, the aid-granting systems, the distribution systems and procedures of International Organizations, the impact of different forms of distribution on third world societies. Most important we need to develop a growing group of experienced personnel and a close level of contact with the senior people in all parts of the world involved with food. Our response to the 1971-1975 crises was the Hillsboro Resolution—but precious little else! If we wait until the crisis hits we will be in the position that a senior MCC International official says we are presently in—when he maintains that we don't have the people who can speak authoritatively to these global issues. When Mennonites are in senior positions in places such as the International Grain Institute, travel to China on grain-selling missions, hold senior positions in the World Bank or CIDA, not to mention the hundreds of experienced MCC alumni—who is in a better position to speak to these issues? Furthermore, if we aren't ready to address global issues—it's time to get onto the learning curve!

If an industry learning curve is the steepest, then it is also most effective if there is a cluster of organizations pursuing a similar goal with possibly, slightly different emphases. For example, Food Bank focuses on the actual collection, storage and shipment of grain while Bread for the World emphasizes the legislative aspects of aid and food policy in the U.S. If our goal is an increasing ability to speak and act authoritatively as the food crisis increases in intensity, then we should be careful not to confine the ideas and learning artificially to meet the needs of our organization charts.

If the Food Bank is confined and limited and becomes simply "another resource" to MCC, then it will be in the tradition of many Old Testament prophets who did not survive their utterances. Possibly there should be another program, with another board, in another place, but there must be progress down the learning curve! It is my recommendation that MCC file this paper away for 15 or 20 years and leave it for someone to evaluate in the light of events at the turn of the century. The only things we know for sure about the future is that it is coming!

Respectfully submitted,

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