

## Jumping Into The Shallow Pond (Part Two)

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**"But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" —  
*Luke 10:29***

The Soviet Union of the 1980s provides a textbook illustration of economic collapse engineered by collectivism. Communism presents itself as high-minded in its redistribution of wealth, leveling the playing field between rich and poor and producing utopian prosperity for all. However, real world economics fails to adhere to collectivist theory.

In reality, rather than the haves and the have-nots meeting somewhere in the middle, the haves are eventually reduced to the level of the have-nots, and everyone suffers. In Mikhail Gorbachev's U.S.S.R., the capitalist West, led by the United States, had to ride in on white horses to save the nation from total economic and political chaos.

That is history, and rather recent history. The failure of redistributionist policies to secure world prosperity is clear to anyone who knows economics. This apparent inability of economic policies to provide help has led some environmentalists to advocate the wholesale—and violent—depopulation of the planet as the only way to save both the ecosphere and humanity. These radical greens vocally assert that only the destruction of *four billion* individuals can ease the pressures that are causing war and poverty. While their voice is still offstage, heard as it were at a distance, far-Left environmentalists may move center-stage as growing numbers of people become convinced that social programs are intrinsically incapable of resolving world-poverty problems.

Many, of course, recognize the murderous solution offered by radical environmentalists to be no solution at all. It is so colossally immoral that it should be consigned to the silent domain of the unspeakable, the rarified realm of the unthinkable. It is a sad indictment on our educational system that it so often permits the voice of these radicals to be heard in our classrooms.

The kill-two-thirds-of-the-people solution to world poverty is just as mindless and immoral as the "final solution" the Nazis submitted for eradicating Germany's so-called "Jewish Problem" in the fourth and fifth decades of the last century. It is a non-solution that deserves no discussion whatsoever. The real alarm is not the radicals' voice, but the airtime afforded it by the liberal media.

### **The Persistence of Poverty**

Every day, the radicals' voice rings truer in the minds of some because the problem of world hunger and disease appear to be at once endemic and incorrigible. Obstinate, stubbornly, they resist the panaceas mountebank humanitarians have provided for them over the years. Yet, some thinkers refuse the proposed cure-all of murder on an unprecedented scale. For example, Lester Brown's is a voice that offers viable, if not always palatable, answers.<sup>1</sup>

He believes that the scope of the threats to our civilization—"environmental degradation, climate change, the persistence of poverty, and the loss of hope"—mandate abandoning Plan A and clinging to Plan B. Plan A is the economic model we have grown up with: dependence on non-renewable

energy sources (e.g., coal and oil) and reliance on disposable commodities. Plan B touts sustainability using non-depletable energy sources (i.e., wind and sun), the widespread use of recyclables, and the mining of the ocean for food and minerals. He submits that Plan B could be underwritten at a cost of about \$161 billion, about a third of the 2006 United States military budget.

God's people, of course, cannot subscribe to Brown's Plan B; some of its provisions are fanciful, while others are just plain misguided.<sup>2</sup> What he offers, however, is a sensible, though admittedly not a final, solution to the problem of poverty—sensible compared to Peter Unger's socialist advocacy for wealth redistribution and the radicals' incredibly defeatist call for mass murder.

Every voice recognizes hunger and disease to be immense and persistent problems destroying the lives of millions every year. However, the answers tendered by Peter Singer and Unger, by Brown, and by the radicals provide no real solutions. Their inability to submit workable solutions is the result of their inability to answer the Judean lawyer's question, "And who is my neighbor?" If these educated shepherds of our society, as misguided as they are, cannot answer that question, can we expect the sheep who hang out on Main Street America—or in the tree-lined avenues flanking it, or the urine-befouled alleys aside it—to answer the question any more satisfactorily?

Who is my neighbor?

### **The Good Samaritan**

Christ, like Singer and Unger, shuns the "nearness test." For, that "certain man" (Luke 10:30) who traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho clearly did not live across the street or down the lane from the Samaritan who ultimately befriended him. Jesus also makes it clear that shared values (religious or otherwise) are not the defining characteristic of neighbors. If that were the case, the priest and the Levite of verses 31 and 32 respectively would have provided assistance immediately. Instead, both "passed by on the other side." To them, apparently, out of sight was out of mind, as they hurried about their business. The Samaritan, on the other hand, was racially and religiously distinct from the inhabitant of Jerusalem he helped.

So, who indeed was that "certain man's" neighbor? The lawyer answered correctly: "He who showed mercy on him" (verse 37). A neighbor is defined as one who has compassion (verse 33) *and* puts that compassion to work by providing tangible relief from some distress. Such level of relief may (and indeed usually will) involve a financial commitment (verse 35).

James makes a similar point when comparing faith with works. A neighbor is not one who, seeing someone without clothing or food, takes no action apart from "encouraging" him with the words, "Depart in peace; be warmed and filled" (James 2:16). Such cold-hearted indifference in the face of authentic need is not a characteristic of a true neighbor at all.

So, to address the issue raised by The Envelope metaphor: Do we have a moral responsibility to send UNICEF the \$100? Yes, but we cannot be as unequivocal as Unger is in his book. Wisdom dictates that we attach more reservations:

» First, we should always keep in mind the needs occasioned by those ever-more-common, extraordinary catastrophes, as with Hurricane Katrina, and then those needs resulting from the tsunami in Asia, and then the needs arising from the earthquake in Pakistan and then . . . who knows what is next?<sup>3</sup> At the same time, we ought not to

forget the hunger experienced by approximately 100 million youngsters in India, plus 40 million in China, plus 100 million in the remainder of Asia, plus 100 million in Africa, plus 30 million in Latin America! The size of the global village limits what one person can do. Wisdom plays an important role in being neighborly.

We should not step out of a reasonable course. There are many people in the world: As much as we may want to, we cannot give to them all. Even Bill Gates would be pinched in his wallet if he tried that. Likewise, there are many relief organizations, some much more reliable than others. Some are just plain scams. If we decide to donate, we should give through reputable agencies.

Always keep in mind that *the compassion that underlies neighborliness is itself a component of agape love*. That type of love is neither unreasoning nor driven by emotion. Rather—and by definition—*agape* love is logical, composed of equal parts of care and thought. So, in this case, a Christian should think with his head, not with his heart!

» Second, we must recognize that there *will* be waste and corruption in this world. That is the way it is today. If we discover that we have supported an unworthy agency, we should not become discouraged. We dare not fall into the category of the "many" in Christ's statement of Matthew 24:12: "Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold." We must not let lawlessness render us unresponsive to others' needs.

» Third, "We can't give what we don't got," as Herbert Armstrong used to say. Our minds should rule our hearts. After God's tithes (and despite what Singer and Unger say), our first financial priority is to our own families. The apostle Paul is plain: "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (I Timothy 5:8). Elsewhere, the same apostle writes:

For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened (II Corinthians 8:12-13).

» Fourth, charity really does begin at home. If giving UNICEF that c-note takes *necessities* from our households, we should not tender it. We must not lose our sense of priorities, as Martha Nussbaum, in refusing to help her daughter obtain a college education, has evidently done. Today, a college education is virtually a necessity, especially if one's child is a keen student. We should not shun education for our children. It should come before our aid to those with unpronounceable names.

» Fifth, before we look for shallow ponds in Mongolia, we ought to narrow our vision a bit to our family in the faith, God's church. The apostle Paul addresses this point in Galatians 6:10: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." For those who have eyes to see, opportunities abound in God's church. If an individual is isolated and unaware of real needs among

God's people, any of the elders would be happy to point him or her in opportunity's direction. Before we send our checks to UNICEF, we should think of the needs of God's people.

» Finally, we need to plan our charitable giving. Paul instructed the members of the Corinthian church to store up according to each individual's prosperity, and to do so in advance so that there would be no last-minute flurry of activity upon his arrival in Corinth (I Corinthians 16:2). Once again, *agape* love, which underlies the mercy a true neighbor shows, is reasoned and thoughtful. It is neither impulsive nor imprudent.

### Neighborliness Is in the Doing

Concerning their collection for the church at Jerusalem, Paul offers God's people in the Corinthian church this advice: "It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; but now you also must complete the doing of it . . ." (II Corinthians 8:10-11). It is vital to remember that we are not neighbors with our talk, but with our walk—our *work* of compassion and mercy to others. Those others should be primarily those of our immediate families and then of the household of faith. However, beyond that, our neighbors include everyone, the "all" of Galatians 6:10.

That is *who* our neighbor is. It is global, yes, but at the same time, local—pretty much limited to those opportunities (Galatians 6:10) that come our way. To be neighborly is to have compassion, to show mercy, as opportunities afford. To be a good neighbor is to exploit opportunities to do good to all.

Paul says, as well, that we must "complete the doing of it." Charitable intentions, unimplemented and lacking follow-through, do not count toward our reward. Wishful thinking—"I wish I had helped that elderly woman upstairs before she died"—merits no praise. After-the-fact remorse—"I knew I should have taken Joe some food"—just does not cut it. In the Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32), Christ makes it clear that the son who actually *worked* in the vineyard did the will of his father. The other son, though he said, "I go, Sir," failed to work and failed to do his father's will. We must act, not just talk.

As Christ said to the lawyer at the conclusion of His comments on the Good Samaritan, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

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### Endnotes

1 Brown, Lester R., *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble*, W. W. Norton, 2006. See The Earth Policy Institute's website at [www.earth-policy.org/Books/PB2/index.htm](http://www.earth-policy.org/Books/PB2/index.htm) for more details.

2 As an example, consider one of Brown's strange ideas: Beef and sheep are inefficient sources of protein. Presumably, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were unaware of this lack of efficiency. It is doubtful that they would buy into Brown's proposal to use fish as a primary source of protein.

3 James Morris avers that natural disasters are taking place with increased frequency and ferocity: "According to the World Bank, natural disasters have increased fourfold over

the last 30 years. . . . That means several billion people need instant help over the course of a decade" ("UN: Hunger Kills 18,000 Kids Each Day," Edith M. Lederer, Associated Press Writer, February 21, 2007).