

Let Them Eat Fish

When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint; when I asked why there were so many poor, they called me a communist.

— Archbishop Hélder Pessoa Câmara

I've often heard people claim that: "You can give a man a fish and feed him for a day, or you can teach him how to fish and feed him for a lifetime." This is such a popular adage among promoters of self-help and network marketing that I think of it as an integral part of what I call "Amway Christianity." And yes, I swallowed and regurgitated it myself, many times — back when my rational thinking was overcome by dreams of easy riches.

Those days are past, however, and some hitherto ignored factors have come to the fore. There actually are numerous reasons why teaching a man to fish can be a waste of both your time and his.

- There is no use in teaching a man to fish if he is too sick to fish and cannot afford medical care.
- There is no point in teaching a man to fish if he starves to death before he learns.
- It is pointless to teach a man to fish if he cannot afford a rod, reel, or fishing license.
- There is no use in teaching a man to fish if he must spend more on childcare than he would earn from fishing.
- No reason to teach a man to fish if he cannot make the trek to the fishing place.
- You are wasting your time teaching if supporting his drug addiction takes all his energy.
- It is useless to teach a man to fish if someone else has already caught all the fish.
- There is no value in teaching a man to fish if the owners of the fishing place do not allow him access.

- He won't listen to your teaching if he has been taught that it is immoral to eat fish.
- There is no point in teaching a man to fish if all the fish have been moved to foreign countries.
- It does no good to teach a man to fish if the fish have all been killed by toxic pollutants in the water.
- It does your spirit no good to teach a man to fish if your motivation is getting a percentage of his catch.

The root problem here is that no amount of teaching (or learning) addresses the *cause* of the man's need. Feeding the hungry is an admirable endeavor, as is the training of useful skills, but long-term solutions require understanding *why* people have insufficient food (or shelter, or clothing, or opportunity). In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg points out that there are three kinds of charity: the individual, the institutional, and the systemic.¹ The first two are insufficient without the third. Compassionate people must not only help their neighbor and support organized charities, they also need to work toward changing the social/political systems that allow injustice and inequality to exist. Jesus, after all, was a social protester and religious reformer — He didn't get crucified just for teaching brotherly love!

Let us keep in mind the wretched children cowering beneath the robe of the Ghost of Christmas Present as he warned: "This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware of them

... for on his brow I see that written which is Doom."²

So far, we have managed to avoid falling in, but we seem to always be teetering on the edge of "Doom." To pull back to a safe distance, each of us needs to actively support a

fair and just social/political system — hook, line, and sinker.

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1 Borg, Marcus, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, Harper One, 2003, p. 201.

2 Dickens, Charles, *A Christmas Carol in Prose: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*. Chapman and Hall, 1843.