

# **James L. Holly, M.D.**

## **Labor Day 2005 Indecency of Exploiting Children Denies Dignity of Labor By James L. Holly, MD**

*Oliver! David Copperfield! A Modest Proposal!* All expose the neglect of children by societies which saw children as chattel to be used for the benefit of those who were fortunate enough to survive childhood. Each raised the consciousness of society about the abuse of children.

In my mind, I have three favorite pictures of children. None is “great” art, and I don’t know the artist for two, but to me they represent what a child’s life should be like. The first represents the protection, which every child deserves. This oval-framed picture hung in my grandparent’s home. It was fashioned in duotone colors and depicted a lamb lost in the snow. Looking at that picture, you could almost feel the chill of the barren surroundings, and you could almost feel the loneliness, hopelessness and helplessness of the little lost lamb lying in the blanket of snow, which appeared so beautiful, but which was actually so deadly.

If that were all that was in the picture, it would be depressing, but in the picture there was also a beautiful collie dog standing astride the lamb, its head turned up, sounding the alarm to those searching for the lamb. Perhaps my life-long love for collies and collie-like dogs comes from this picture, but I know that this picture portrays the alarm, which must be sounded for every child lost in an uncaring, unfriendly and potentially deadly environment.

Our society can generate tremendous empathy for a child who falls down a well and is trapped. Yet, our society can ignore the plight of thousands of children trapped in wells of poverty, sickness and hopelessness. And, no collie stands astride them to sound the alarm. It is estimated that world-wide over 120 million children, between the ages of 5 and 14, work full-time for subsistence wages often in slave-like settings. In the midst of Congressional and public outcry against world-wide abusive child labor, *Associated Press* reported that over 100,000 children age 6-12 work in the fields of America. Many of these children work ten hours a day harvesting produce for the Thanksgiving tables of overweight Americans.

On this Labor Day, where is the collie dog to stand astride these children and raise the alarm? Some might say, but aren’t these children foreigners? Aren’t these children illegal immigrants? The collie dog would respond that any excuse used to ignore one’s responsibility to children, foreign or not, poor or not, mine or not, is morally bankrupt, for you have no more devotion to nor love for your own children than you show toward the children of others.. Children forced to work away their childhood and to be exposed to toxic pesticides, deserve to have someone stand up and say, “No!!” National origin, place of birth, race have no consideration in deciding if children deserve protection and a childhood.

Without the collie, society can ignore the needs of the poorest and weakest among us

without penalty. Without the collie, the economic interest of those who profit by child-labor – not in Southeast Asia, but in Southwest USA can be served on the backs of pre-schoolers. In the past, Labor Unions and the Labor Day they originated, served as “collie-dogs” raising the alarm of abuse of laborers, adult or child.

It was in that spirit that John L. Lewis declared:

“I have never faltered or failed to present the cause or plead the case of the mine workers of this country, I have pleaded your cause from the pulpit and the public platform; in joint conference with the operators of this country; before the bar of state legislators; in the counsels of the president and cabinet; and in the public press of this nation...Not in quivering tones of a feeble mendicant asking alms but in the thunderous voice of the captain of mighty host, demanding the rights to which free men are entitled.”

Today, we need “thunderous voices” demanding the rights to which free men, women AND children are entitled.” Those “thunderous voices need to be sound on Labor Day and every day in which labor takes place. Those voices need to be raised against abuse by farmer, employer, labor leader, preacher, politician and parents, not just for those who pay their salaries or benefit them personally, but they must raise their voice for the stranger, for the fatherless and for the foreigner.

The tradition of John L. Lewis was that of the Old Testament prophets. In his excellent study *Covenant and Promise* (The Westminster Press 1979, Philadelphia), Dr. John Bright spoke of the prophets of Israel, who preached in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Centuries BC, addressing circumstances remarkably similar to those faced in 20<sup>th</sup> Century AD America; he said:

“(Amos) spoke to a nation proud of its military strength, untroubled by any immediate external threat, and confident of the future. He addressed an affluent society which enjoyed every luxury money could buy. Yet, it was a sick society: at the top the privileged rich, at the bottom the hopelessly poor. And the rich were not only careless of the plight of the poor; they missed no opportunity to crowd them, cheat them, and rob them of their rights. (*Covenant and Promise*, p. 83)

“Amos’ attack on the crimes of society is...well known...He savagely assailed the oppression of the poor and the cheating of the poor, as well as the corrupt judicial system which denied them any hope of obtaining justice...” (*Covenant and Promise*, p. 83)

In Amos’ view, God demands of His people justice – first, last, and always. The busy (religious activity) whereby they think to satisfy His demands is a fraud of which (Amos) wishes no part.” (*Covenant and Promise*, p. 84)

“Micah’s attack on the crimes of society is fully parallel to that of Amos...(His) hot indignation against the powerful for their crimes against the helpless dominates the entire message of Micah...To Micah, as to Amos, these were crimes against Yahweh, gross violations of His righteous demands. (*Covenant and Promise*, pp. 114-115).

“Jeremiah (said), ‘If you really want to know what a king is like...look at your father... There was a king...He ‘ate and drank’...and yet ‘did justice and righteousness,’ especially to the poor and helpless who could not defend themselves...he lived like a king, but he also behaved like one. And this, says Jeremiah, was to exhibit the most supreme of all virtues: the knowledge of Yahweh (‘Is not this what it is to know me?’” (*Covenant and Promise*, p. 158)

“(The king) had been ordained by God to establish justice and righteousness in the land, especially justice toward the weak who could not help themselves...”  
(*Covenant and Promise*, p. 161)

The prophets were God’s “collie dogs.” They raised the alarm when those who claimed to love God neglected their responsibility to their fellow man, because man’s love for God was truly shown by man’s care for other men. Today, the church often forgets its responsibility to raise the alarm and to indignantly oppose the abuse of children and men and women.

*Noblesse oblige* – the condescending giving of alms by the rich to the poor – is an inadequate motivation for philanthropy as it has at its roots the giving to those who are labeled as undeserving, or, at best, less deserving. Philanthropy is only meritorious when it makes the giver vulnerable to the person and the pain of the recipient. Philanthropy is giving with grace only when giving creates a bond of love, respect and caring between the giver, the recipient and indeed God. And, if as the Scripture says, God obligates Himself to those who defend and give to the poor, God is the offended party when the poor are neglected.

In this way, philanthropy and labor are similar. The dignity of labor is established when the laborer is cared for, respected and honored by the one who employs him or her. It is still true that no person of significant means, other than criminals or con-men, got to where they are except by the labor of others. Gratitude demands that those who benefit from the laborer of others make certain that there is no abuse in the care of the laborer and that the laborer knows of the honored position he or she has in society.

The Gospel of Christ is distorted by the ignoring of the eternal while focusing only upon the temporal. But the Gospel of Christ is equally distorted by the ignoring of the physical needs of others while building religious mansions – we often call them churches -- as symbols to the religious pride of man.

The charitable act begins with the raising of the alarm, particularly when it is children who are being neglected or abused. We must see that Christian worship is not consummated by singing, praying or preaching, but by the sacrifice of self in service to others. As Jeremiah said to the king, “Such is an act of knowing God.”

Whether politician, private citizen, physician or public defender, we all have a function as “collie dogs,” to stand astride the poor, and particularly the child, and announce to the world their need and our caring. We must make certain that children are not neglected due to our silence. We must make certain that we do not profit on the backs of babies.

America needs collie dogs to raise the alarm for little children who are constantly exposed to pesticides in order to place cheap vegetables on the table of rich Americans.

On this Labor Day, the most obvious way in which we can celebrate the dignity of labor; the most important step we can take in establishing forever the value of labor, is to make certain that we do not increase our comfort at the hands of children. Labor is dignified; and, it is right for children to learn to work, but it is indecent for a society such as ours to allow ANY child to be exploited by ANYONE. On this Labor Day, the Labor Union and the church, both of whom have a mission as “collie dogs,” must raise the alarm anew and demand that children be protected and that all who sustain the prosperity of America be treated with dignity, honor and respect.