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The High Cost of Living

Its Cause and
its Cure

A SERMON

By

REV. A. E. COOKE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,
VANCOUVER, B.C.

PRICE 50 EACH

The High Cost of Living : Its Cause and its Cure.

His disciples came unto him and said, This is a desert place and the day is now far spent; send them away, that they may go into the country and villages round about, and buy themselves somewhat to eat. But he answered and said unto them, Give ye them to eat.—Mark 6:35-37.

I offer no apology for the subject I deal with tonight. If Jesus Christ wrought miracles to feed the hungry people of His day, it is quite in order for a preacher of His gospel to speak about feeding the hungry multitudes of today. Nothing that is human was foreign to Jesus. Every phase of human life appealed to Him. He shared in the gladness of the wedding feast and He wept with those who grieved at the tomb. He toiled at the work-bench along with the toilers, and He slept in the fisherman's boat on the sea. He sat in the synagogue to worship with the elders, and He stopped in the market place to play with the children. He comforted the sorrowing, and healed the sick. He defended the homeless, the poor and oppressed, and He hurled the grafters and profiteers from the church where they had gathered to fleece the poor. He fed men's souls with the words of life, and He fed their bodies with the food they needed to still their hunger. He defended the people against all forms of greed and oppression, and in doing so He roused the hatred of the rich and tyrannical.

There is no question that Jesus would have something to say on the problems confronting the people to-day were He here in the flesh. He would speak out on the High Cost of Living, because it is harassing the minds and vexing the souls of greater multitudes than those He fed on the hill-sides of Galilee. Now that the world-war is practically ended the greatest problem that faces the nation is how to reduce the tremendous expense of keeping body and soul together. Authors have written on it. Economists studied it. Statisticians figured on it. Professors lectured on it. Commissions investigated it. Journalists discussed it and politicians dodged it. But the ordinary man and his wife are still facing it, their hearts sinking lower while prices mount higher and life becomes more and more of a real struggle for existence.

Whether we will or not, we must meet and grapple with the problem, for it forces itself most rudely on all of us. It confronts the father in his office, the mother in the kitchen and the baby in the cradle. It affects the home and the school, the market and the store, the church and the parliament. From the beggar in his hovel to the King on his throne all men and women feel its effects more or less directly.

During the war, while the nations struggled against the common enemy, and our gallant men endured and suffered in the cause of righteousness, the people at home most gladly sacrificed many things that victory might come. They stinted themselves in necessary food to supply the men who fought their battles on every front, and to feed the starving millions of Europe. They paid high prices without a murmur because they felt it was necessary under the circumstances. They loyally answered every call of the Food Controller and deprived themselves of many things, while speculators and profiteers made fabulous fortunes out of the food and clothes that went to the Allies and to soldiers' dependents here at home. Their loyalty to the great cause, their deep sense of patriotism and their sacrificial spirit enabled our people to endure to the end and the final triumph.

But what are the conditions we find to-day? During the last five years the prices of food have practically doubled, and they are still going up. But wages have not increased in proportion. According to the statistical experts, food rose in price twice as rapidly as wages, while most professional people, shop-keepers and office workers have had no appreciable increase at all. The poor are suffering from actual want. People of reasonable incomes do not get enough food to supply their needs, while those of fairly large incomes feel the pinch of the cost of meat, poultry, eggs, butter, sugar and many things that, five years ago, were the commonest things on their tables.

What is the cause of it all? Is it simply due to a world shortage of food supplies, as the food speculators and big interests constantly tell us? Or is it due to the fact that these speculators have themselves created scarcity conditions and manipulated prices for their own enrichment? Or is it perhaps a combination of both?

There is no doubt that the war has produced a shortage of food throughout the world. The devastation of large areas of fertile land in Europe; the withdrawal of millions of men from productive labor for the work of destruction, the tremendous losses by the submarine campaign, the present chaos in Russia and other parts—all these have brought about a great shortage in the world's supplies, while starving Europe has to be fed by other countries, like Australia, Canada and the United States for some time to come. This means less food to go around and higher prices till production again becomes normal. But that is very far from the whole story. It forms a favorite text for the speculator and middleman, but the real emphasis must be placed on the other side of the story. Frederic C. Howe, Commissioner of Immigration at New York, is right when he says in his book, "The High Cost of Living," that

"The prices we are paying are far in excess of what we should pay, even with the law of supply and demand freely operative. . . . Speculation is unquestionably responsible for a great part of the increase."

The fact is that the exploitation of the food products of this whole continent by unscrupulous profiteers is far more responsible for high prices than all the shortage produced by the war.

The prices of food for the whole continent, Vancouver included, are set by the food speculators who operate in the Grain Exchanges and Chambers of Commerce of Minneapolis, Chicago and Winnipeg and a few other centres. Take the prices of flour and bread as an instance. Chicago, at the centre of a network of railways reaching over the country, is the headquarters of the trade in wheat for the American States, yet only about one-twentieth of the wheat of America ever reaches Chicago. But a handful of men in the Board of Trade of Chicago fix the price of all wheat in the States, and they fix it so as to fill their own pockets at the nation's expense. They speculate every day of the year in about 25,000,000 bushels of wheat or twice the amount of actual wheat received in Chicago in the year. The Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce gambles in about ten billions of futures every year, though the actual grain that comes to the city is only about two hundred million bushels. For every bushel of wheat actually sold on the exchange of Minneapolis fifty bushels that never were grown are sold on speculation:

"In 1915 the United States produced 1,100,000,000 bushels of wheat. At 40 cents on the bushel the consumers paid \$440,000,000 in speculative prices to the grain gamblers. . . . And if the manipulation in wheat is indicative of the gambling tribute on other products, the loss to the farmers, or excess sum paid by consumers, must have amounted to more than a billion dollars."

That is the statement of Frederick Howe, in the book I have quoted already. And Herbert Hoover, speaking before the United States Senate Committee of Agriculture in June of 1917, on the price of flour, declared:

"The wholesale price of flour should not have exceeded \$9 a barrel, and yet the price has been as high as \$15 per barrel throughout the country, and probably averages over \$14. Someone is taking \$5 per barrel on 10,000,000 barrels per month, which is marketed in this country. This is \$50,000,000 per month taken out of the American public, and since the raise in the price of flour above \$9 a barrel, and before the new crop, we may assume rightly that over \$250,000,000 will have been extracted from the consumer in excess of normal profits of the trade and distribution. The manufacturers and normal traders have not had this difference; it lies in speculation and outside of genuine trades, and the higher trading margins forced by the speculative incidence of the war."

And mark you! That was when the farmer was getting \$1.60 a bushel for his wheat. What did it mean when the speculators had forced the price to \$3.10? Think also of the

fact that by careful investigation it was revealed that nearly one-half of the value of their crop was taken from the Western farmers every year by the grain exchanges and middlemen who controlled the market. From July 1st, 1915, to January 1st, 1916, the loss amounted to \$302,832,000. That means that, for every \$4 the farmer actually got, \$3 was taken by the middlemen either from the farmer or the public who ate the bread.

But you may tell me that this all happened across the line and not in Canada. Well, listen! When the war broke out the price of wheat in Canada was 78 cents a bushel. Immediately the speculators on the Winnipeg Grain Exchange got busy, and the price went up above \$1.10 and kept climbing up till the spring of 1917, when it went to close on \$3.20 a bushel. Why? Because the profiteers had learned that the Allied nations were sending their buyers to purchase wheat for the men in the trenches and the people threatened with starvation in Europe. And these profiteers simply put the gun of dire necessity to the heads of the Allied buyers, including Britain, and forced them to hand over some millions of dollars additional money for the food the mother country and her Allies so desperately needed. And at the same time the soldiers' wives and children, and widows and orphans here at home were forced to pay almost double price for the bread they ate, for the price of the wheat that was needed to make a barrel of flour went up from \$3.50 to \$19.

The same kind of thing has been going on in every line. The big milling companies made such profits on flour that, even when the Government limited the profit to 25 cents on a barrel, the surplus profits of five of them amounted to almost ten million dollars in 1917 alone; the Ogilvie Company heading the list with \$3,440,000—more than \$3,000,000 above what it made in 1913. Half a dozen meat packing firms control the prices of meat and fruit and vegetables and other perishable foods of this whole continent. They own the stock yards, refrigerator cars, cold storage houses, oil mills and many of the banks. They have virtual ownership of the means of marketing the whole foodstuffs of the nation. When the cattle men and farmers have their cattle to sell the packing houses beat down the prices, and the cattlemen have to take what they offer or drive their cattle home again. They fix the price that you and I have to pay for the meat on our table. They control the banks and can force the farmer to sell when they want him to do so. They control the governments in many cases by similar methods. Here are a few short paragraphs from a confidential report of a special committee that lately investigated the meat packing industry on both sides of the line.

1st. "At the beginning of the war the British Government offered to purchase the great quantity of foodstuffs the meat packers had stored in Great Britain, but the packers demanded such a high price that the British Government declined to buy.

"Later, the British Government commandeered the lot. This action so provoked the meat packers that they brought their influence to bear upon the New York banks and prevented them from investing in the Anglo-French loan, which would have been a failure had not the British Government paid the meat packers an additional \$15,000,000 for the foodstuffs they had taken."

2nd. "The prices of foodstuffs were made in Herbert Hoover's office, which was filled with the packers' employees—\$1.00 a year men, who were paid high salaries by the packers."

In the recent investigation before the Senate Agricultural Committee it was proven that the head of the poultry division in Mr. Hoover's office had been in communication with one of the packing firms which had made the prices for poultry.

3rd. "That conditions in Canada were not exactly similar to those in the United States, because here some of the Senators are interested."

4th. "That the fisheries in Canada are largely controlled by the Booth Company of the United States and the Swift Company of Canada." Also, it is rumored, "there were several men on the Canadian Food Board who were interested in the fish business." That "the price of fish ought not to be more than ten to twelve cents a pound, but it has been kept up in order to increase the profits of vested interests, since the fishermen are very poorly paid."

5th. That "it is not the law of supply and demand which makes the high cost of living, but the packer who makes the price to the producer as well as to the consumer."

6th. That "most of the press is chloroformed by being paid high prices for running large advertisements for the packers, consequently cannot expose their methods"

Ottawa, March 13, 1919.

In 1916 the profits of Armour & Co. were \$20,100,000 and Swift & Co. made \$20,465,000. We all know how the Davies Company in Eastern Canada made a profit of 80% on the money it invested in 1916, clearing some millions of dollars during the war. The British Columbia Packing Co. is reported to have made a surplus of \$1,348,000, more than 60% of the par value of the capital stock.

In the spring of 1917 speculation in eggs went wild. Four thousand carloads of eggs that never existed were bought and sold over and over against by the Butter and Egg Board of Chicago, the price going up every time a deal was made. One dealer and his associates held 43,200,000 eggs in storage at the end of 1916. He had bought them at 19½ to 20 cents a dozen and was holding them for 50 cents.

Another dealer made a million dollars of profits on eggs in a single year. An investigation revealed that eggs had gone through sixteen middlemen's hands in getting to market, each of whom took off a profit. At last they were selling up to 75 cents a dozen while the same eggs were selling for 35 cents in England, after two and a half years of war. One of the storage companies in Montreal dealing in eggs declared 50% on its capital in 1917, in addition to large reserves. No wonder the Cost of Living Commissioner, "that man O'Conner," as they called him, declared that "the prices charged for eggs were unjustifiable." And these are the people who determine the price of the eggs produced by the fowl in the backyards of Vancouver. The same practice prevails as to poultry, butter, sugar and many other commodities. In fact, almost every article of food is under the control of the middleman, who lives like a parasite off the food that others produce. He does not hesitate to hold back food till it rots, so as to keep the price where he wants it.

We have, on a small scale, right here in Vancouver a sample of what goes on all over the continent as a part of the system by which the middlemen and food speculators keep the prices just where they want them. Here is a detailed report, giving exact figures for every month of last year and four months of this, which shows that over 490 tons of food-stuffs were destroyed in the city incinerator of Vancouver during the twelve months of 1918. In the month of May over 82 tons of fruit and vegetables, fish and eggs were destroyed, an average of nearly three tons a day. One firm alone sent over 33 tons of potatoes. In June there were 79 tons destroyed, and up to the end of April this year 126 tons have been burned. Where did it come from? The bulk of it came from the wholesale warehouses on Water Street where almost every firm that deals in farm produce is in the combine known as the Vancouver Fruit and Produce Association. And I am informed there are two or three private incinerators along "the street" where food is destroyed and no record made public.

Now I am not suggesting that all this food is deliberately wasted. A certain amount of fruit and produce will go bad in spite of the utmost care and honesty on the part of those handling it. That is inevitable. It may be tainted before it is shipped. It may be side-tracked by the railroad long enough to allow it to spoil. It may rot in the warehouse before it is noticed. But I am informed by men who have worked for years in these places that frequently produce is held for higher prices until it becomes unfit for food for man or beast. In one instance four carloads of Lillooet potatoes were held all winter for \$1.75 a sack until nearly two carloads had to be destroyed and not a cent of reduction was made in the price, except five cents a sack on a five-ton order for a department store. In another warehouse 700 crates or boxes of apples were kept from October until about March when only one box in every fifteen was said to be fit to look

at. They were then flung into barrels and carted off to North Vancouver by a man who used them to feed his pigs.

A certain wholesale grocery firm had two whole floors of its warehouse stacked full of canned fruit and vegetables for which it had paid \$1.00 to \$1.40 a dozen. It held them until the increasing war demands put prices up and then it sold them at \$2.25 to \$3.50 a dozen. Early last year this same firm was selling rice at \$195 a ton which it had purchased shortly before at \$72 a ton.

Here is a confidential report that was made to Ottawa on the work of the fruit and produce combine of Water Street. It tells of how a certain firm which would not join the combine and dared to sell some goods at lower rates than those fixed by it, was deliberately boycotted by the members of this "ring" and the brokers forced to cancel their orders. Referring to two court cases which this firm won against these brokers this report asserts:

"A perusal of the evidence and particularly the discoveries, will show clearly that the Association was behind the interference in every case and that the brokers were merely acting under instructions. This is borne out by information I have received from some brokers and others who know that line of business. . . . They say that the Association directs the way in which each member conducts his business, and that if they break any of the resolutions they are fined. I understand that the Association meets at least weekly and has a secretary; that the various grocers are listed and if any dealer sells to a grocer contrary to the list he is fined. . . . My informants even suggest that this scheme of things also covers quantities of sale, prices, etc."

Of course they do. One lesser member of the combine sold one crate of vegetables, on the verge of spoiling, to a Chinaman peddler at a reduction. The deal was discovered and he was brought on the carpet and promptly fined. That was in war time, when the Government of this Dominion was entreating the people to produce more food and save something at every meal for the hungry Allies and the battling armies. And that kind of thing is still going on—so I was told the other day by one who does business on Wholesale Row. Now, I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not condemning any men as individuals. I have no doubt that some of these men are working as hard and seeking to do business as honestly as any of us. I am not claiming they are all dishonest exploiters of the people's food. But I do say that the system under which they are forced to do business, the system which tolerates and even necessitates this kind of thing is a rotten system. So long as men are forced to earn their livelihood by making profits out of their neighbors, so long we shall have these iniquitous practices.

Remember, this is only a sample, in a very small way, of how the thing is done, and the public made pay. It stretches

across this whole continent east, west, north and south, from Vancouver right to New York, where 50 or 65 cents out of every dollar the people pay for their food goes into the pockets of unscrupulous middlemen. Howe tells us that the waste in New York City alone from the operations of these agencies is estimated at from \$150,000,000 to \$200,000,000 a year. And yet we talk of the high cost of living and wonder why such prices should be. We talk of the Government fixing prices so that our people may be able to live without famine conditions.

But what is the Government likely to do? Absolutely nothing, except what the people of Canada force it to do. The Government itself is in the grip of the handful of men who control the whole trade and commerce of Canada. The wheat speculators, the packing houses, the railroads and banks of this Dominion are so bound together by interlocking directorates and are so powerful in the realm of politics that they hold the Government in the heart of their fist. Not even in the desperate days of the war did the Government dare to make any serious attempt to fix prices in the interests of the common people. They never professed to do so. They urged the people to save and eat less of certain foods, but they let the prices go soaring skyward to fill the coffers of the food speculators and profiteers.

The very week after war was declared the leading bakers of Canada earnestly urged the Government to fix the price of wheat at once, before the speculators began their robberies of the people. Wheat was then 78 cents a bushel. Had the price been fixed at a dollar the farmers would have been as well satisfied and as well off financially, as they were finally when the price was fixed at \$2.20 a bushel. But the Government refused and allowed the profiteers to manipulate prices for nearly three years before they moved. Then, when the price had been driven up to nearly \$3.20 a bushel, they fixed it at \$2.20 for the rest of the war.

Again, when the call went forth for the nation to save every ounce of beef and bacon to feed the soldiers, we were urged to eat more fish. The fisheries of British Columbia were asked to provide supplies for the whole Northwest, and the Provincial Committee on Food Control got busy at once. I was on that committee and know what happened. Here is a copy of the unanimous report sent down to Ottawa detailing the plan to create a market throughout the country for the best of "ground fish" at two pounds for fifteen cents. Every detail was figured out, and this price was high enough to allow, on a minimum catch, \$200 a month and board to every fisherman employed and \$6,000 clear profit each month to the company providing the trawler. A maximum catch would have brought each fisherman \$320 a month and \$9,600 profit to the company. And this at the time when our men at the front were risking their lives in our defence for \$30 per month! What happened? The Food Controller turned down our report, fixed the price at ten to twelve cents a

pound, and made the public, even the wives and widows of soldiers, pay an extra \$12,000 to \$17,500 a month to the fishermen and the company that owned the trawler. Again the public suffered that the big interests might pile up their profits.

Take just another instance of the Government's lack of nerve in handling this question. Last October, when public opinion was becoming aroused about high prices, an Order-in-Council was passed appointing Fair Price Committees with powers to really investigate the prices charged by any firms suspected of profiteering. Such a committee was then appointed for this city of ours. But before the official letter arrived confirming the appointment the Order-in-Council was cancelled and a new one passed providing for a committee that had no power to get at the facts, but was loaded with a representative of the very firm that was to be examined. The whole thing was turned into such a farce that those who had been appointed promptly refused to have any connection with it at all. The big interests had evidently taken alarm and they made the Government toe the line once again. There are other instances which prove conclusively that the Government cannot, and will not dare to oppose the interests of the food profiteers until it is forced to do so by the united action of an outraged people. Even the British Government had to bow to the will of the big meat packers and their banker friends before it could raise the money it needed to finance the war. Do you think for a moment the Ottawa Government can do any better?

What can we do? If the Government fails us where lies the remedy? Must the people gradually come to starve in order to furnish the growing profits of the speculators? High wages won't do it; for every time that wages go up prices are raised to pay the increase and something extra. Increased production will not do it, for the railroads and express companies will only carry as much as the big interests allow them to carry. Whole carloads of food have been left to rot at the terminals. In 1917, when this continent was ringing with condemnation of food speculators, 800,000 pounds of spring vegetables were permitted to rot on the wharves of the Hudson River. And the same amount of fruit and vegetables was carted off to the Vancouver incinerator. Hundreds of tons of potatoes are said to have rotted in British Columbia and tons of plums were plowed into the soil on Vancouver Island. It is the same in the case of the meat production. In Alberta a certain packing house had contracted for 800 head of cattle from one farmer. When the cattle were driven into a nearby town the buyer picked out 300 of them, told the farmer the others were not "beef," and let him take the 500 home. The real reason was that the market price had to be forced where the packers wanted it.

The fact is we shall never see the prices of food come down to a just and proper level till the whole system of production and trade and commerce is changed. The present

system of production for profit instead of for use must be completely wiped out. The food speculators must be put out of business just like any common parasite. (I do not use the word "parasite" in any offensive sense.) The middlemen must go, and public ownership of distributing agencies and public utilities must take the place of private ownership and grasping combines.

Why are the people of this city paying fifteen cents for each quart of milk they use? Not because the farmer gets too much, or because the milk is scarce; but simply because the ridiculous manner of handling the milk by the city dairies piles up the cost of getting it to our homes. Some time ago the Fraser Valley Farmers' Association wrote the City Council that they were prepared to deliver it to the city homes at ten cents a quart if the distribution were properly managed. But the City Council had neither the insight nor the foresight nor the nerve to accept the challenge and put the thing through in the interests of the people. What this city needs is less talk and more brains and initiative put into its management. The fact is we have had eighteen dairies tumbling over each other all over the city where one delivery man in each district would do. About \$100,000 could be saved each year to the people of Vancouver if a municipal system of delivery were instituted and properly managed.

If Vancouver established a real Municipal Market, owned and controlled by the city itself, into which farmers could ship their products direct, and where the buyer could meet, where the grocer could get his supplies and the householder go if he or she wished, the produce "ring" on Water Street would soon be eliminated. This is done in Denmark, it is done in Australia, New Zealand and in many places in Great Britain. In Denmark, Australia and Germany the governments own and control the railways and operate them not for the profit of a few millionaires, but for public service. The Australian farmer can send his butter 12,000 miles to England for one cent a pound; and his meat at a cost of three-quarters of a cent for each pound, because the Government owns the railroads and ships that carry it.

Let the Canadian Government do as other countries in Europe have done for years—let them open the parcel post to food distributors and carry parcels of any size at a rate sufficient to pay for cost of handling and the eggs we eat will not be double the price that the farmer gets because they have had to pass through ten to fifteen middlemen's hands. When butter and poultry and other products come straight from the farm to the table by parcel post in a few hours the price of food will come down to where it should be. And this is done—has been done for years in other countries. In some parts of Europe the parcel post will carry a ton of coal or a piano if the shipper desires, and it is done at cost. All the Government needs is to acquire the cars—refrigerator and express cars—and increase its staff and let the people do the rest.

The labor governments of Australia and the farmer gov-

ernment of Denma. < have conclusively proved to the world that the cost of living can be reduced and kept down to a minimum by cutting out the middlemen who live as parasites on the rest of society and by putting the railroads and banks, packing houses and cold storage and markets under public control and operation. And until Canada does the same we shall never have anything but high prices, profiteering, industrial strife and social unrest.

You may say that such a scheme of things is impossible. But I answer No! It is not only possible but it is absolutely imperative and, above all, it is Christian. If the society of the future is still to be based on the present system of profits for those who can squeeze them out of their fellows instead of on service for the good of all, then we have no business to call ourselves a Christian people. The present system is fundamentally opposed to the teaching and principles of Jesus Christ.

Emile de Laveleye, the Belgian economist, was perfectly right when he said, "If Christianity were taught and understood conformably to the spirit of its Founder the existing social organism could not last a day." And James Russell Lowell was also right when he said, "There is dynamite enough in the New Testament, if illegitimately applied; to blow all our existing institutions to atoms." "If a man wants to be a Christian he must stand over against things as they are and condemn them in the name of that higher conception of life which Jesus revealed. If a man is satisfied with things as they are he belongs to the other side." We do not want "to blow all our existing institutions to atoms," but we do want to remould every one of them. And they must be remoulded according to the pattern laid down by Christ. He did not bow down and worship "the god of things as they are." He did not accept the social customs and conditions of His day as final. He did not revere the man of wealth or the man who bossed the rest of his neighbors. He flung the grafters out of the temple. He declared that the man who would rule should be the servant of others. He repudiated self-interest as the motive of life. He demanded brotherhood in all its relations. He insisted on love as the compelling motive to all conduct. Not profits and gain, but service and sacrifice must rule men's lives in the Kingdom of Christ. There is no room for the profiteer nor the millionaire in that Kingdom, for no man can rob his neighbor, nor cheat his customer, nor seek his own interest when he loves his neighbor as himself and follows the Christ who lived and toiled and died for humanity.

The high cost of living will no more be a problem, and the business system that exploits the hunger and thirst of the people will disappear from the earth for ever, when World-service becomes the standard of all the nations, World-love their motive and World-brotherhood their goal.



