ABORIGINAL HEALTH

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"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

Once upon a time in a land far away and a time long ago there lived a quiet and lonely old man. He inhabited a very large mansion, full of good things which he scarcely ever used. One day some squatters moved in. They were not evil people, but they considered the mansion to be virtually empty, and they disregarded rather than persecuted the old man. For his part, he found himself virtually powerless to do anything about the occupation, so he tolerated it. He even began to join in socially, and to try to be part of the group. The reaction of the others varied. Some didn't mind; others objected strongly and excluded the old man, even from parts of his own house. Most didn't seem to care one way or another. To them he became the invisible man. They didn't speak to him, they didn't listen to him, they didn't do anything for him. If they talked about him at all (which wasn't all that often) it was to mock and deride.

Under this treatment the old man lost his dignity. He began to scrounge; he began to drink; he lost all confidence in himself. He began to accept other people's opinions of himself, and he became less and less able to join in society. Eventually his health began to suffer and he grew sick. What did the others do then? What would you have done? In my story, the squatters did nothing. They had never cared and they did not care even now when they saw sickness and suffering. Even when the old man tried to help himself, no one aided him. He was neglected to death.

What do you think of those squatters? They lacked compassion didn't they? It was not even active persecution; it was sheer complacent carelessness which pushed the old man to the edge of society and then destroyed him. Do you blame the squatters?

Last week Professor Fred Hollows, who is Australia's foremost expert on Aboriginal health resigned as director of the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program in protest at the transfer of the program from Federal to State control. Professor Hollows, an international eye expert whose trachoma program has treated 104,000 aborigines in 6 years, told a Sydney news conference "We will no longer co-operate with a government that is deliberately placing Aboriginal health at the feet of State Governments the very people who nearly succeeded in the genocide of Aborigines.

"We won't be party to the racist, ineffective, wasteful State health programs that are even now oppressing Aborigines.

He called on citizens to protest to their M.P.s about the handover which he said was "appalling" because Aboriginal health problems were now more than the problems in many Third World countries.

"Trachoma afflicts up to four out of ten Aborigines in the outback, blindness is seven times higher than among whites. There is a horrendous rate of syphilis and of leprosy and also a high cardiac failure rate. These are all preventable or avoidable diseases.

Let me ask you again. Did you blame the squatters in my story? Then we stand condemned. The Aboriginal people are suffering for <u>our</u> neglect, now at this moment. Their sufferings are a scandalous blot on our so-called civilisation What will you do about it?

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