THE BIBLE AND AGRARIANISM

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As a suburban grown Christian I always wondered if I was missing something in my Christian experience. So much of the imagery in the Bible is filled with nature and farm animals and farm life and so I thought that my knowledge would be greatly enhanced if I were to experience that kind of life. But providence did not open up the opportunity until many years later when the Lord led me and my young family to live on an Amish farm. We really went from one extreme to another. We were living in the concrete jungle of the inner city of Philadelphia. We then found ourselves in the bucolic setting of a dairy farm with horses plowing the fields, cows on the other side of our fence, electricity powered by a gas generator, fresh milk right from the vat, and a coal stove for heating our house.

Some Scriptures did come alive as I saw the fields plowed, planted, and harvested. The rains came down and watered the fields. The corn grew. The manure fertilized the field (oh, what a smell!). The farmer rose up early and milked the cows. The whole family worked hard to make their living. Prayer was made to the Lord through threat of drought or through the experience of too much rain. The hills surrounding the farm were beautiful, especially after a snow or during a beautiful sunset. So the Scriptures opened up to me in these wonderful ways. But if they taught that all believers should live in the country and farm, then it would have been made quite clear, but they do not. We see believers living in the cities and in the country, in the house of Caesar and in deserts. They live in cities and they live in rural areas. We find no commandment requiring to have a farm, raise livestock, or till a garden. But the agrarian lifestyle has some very important lessons to teach which the Scriptures truly want us to know and believe.

First of all, we recognize that there are agrarian movements. The Anabaptist community is filled with such expressions. Their “order” or way of life is based on their theology of separating from the world. This means living a life of simplicity, which includes farming, the trades, and manual labor. It has become their way of life and it is their order or law. By their way of thinking, a person who adopts their lifestyle is living the proper Christian life. If one farms, or works a certain craft, and lives the simple life according to their particular laws, then they are living a life pleasing to God. But it is obvious that these forms are just that — forms. The external forms are not the fruit of a renewed heart. Therefore this is not an acceptable way of life in honor of Christ.

There is also an agrarian type movement where people “get back to nature.” Its philosophy consists of casting off certain modern conveniences and living a simple kind of lifestyle. It does not have the Christian background of the Anabaptists but rather has a humanistic, naturalistic one. It was very visible in the sixties and seventies and still has a following. But since it is not based on the Scriptures it cannot be called a Christian movement.
So then what, if any, aspects of agrarianism are worthwhile? Let me give some practical examples. When I was living in Lancaster County, Pa., I worked for an Amish paint company for a while. We went throughout the county painting farms. The foreman on the job was the son of the owner. At the ripe old age of twenty he was the best skilled and most knowledgeable man on the job. He also helped his father do the estimates. He also helped with certain other chores on their dairy farm. I was about thirty-five and I thought to myself that when I was his age my skills were not that advanced. I knew a lot about sports but not half as much about the trades or a comparable occupation. This was my first lesson.

Secondly, we had a coal stove as our source of heat for the home. It was sure different having to get it working. I had to go out in the woods to get some wood to start a fire and then throw the coals on it once it got good and hot. But the heat that it threw out was wonderful and made the downstairs quite cozy while the upstairs was a little cool but gave one a nice sleep at night. It was also different having the source of our electricity be a gas generator. Our lights would flicker every once in a while; we were without power only a time or two over the space of a couple of years. On the other hand, if there was a blackout in our area (which did happen), the farm ran on as usual, being not dependent on outside sources of energy.

Thirdly, we have never forgotten the wonderful food that we had in that county. How we miss the farm fresh milk straight from the milk vat! We miss the fresh apple cider (without preservatives) and we really miss the fresh vegetables from the local stands and from our own garden. My wife learned to can and we never had any better cucumber pickles, or spaghetti sauce, or pumpkin pie, or green beans, or whatever! Home grown and home canned are out of this world.

These examples help to express three very important aspects of the agrarian lifestyle. First of all it helps to produce a skilled work force. Young people growing up on a farm have the opportunity to do plenty of worthwhile work. They can help their parents with the general farm work and they can also get involved in starting up their own kind of ventures in such things as animal husbandry or machine operation and repair or gardening or sewing and quilting. Many families ran their little business ventures right out of their farm buildings. Secondly, the agrarian lifestyle helps one to develop an alternative source of power for the business. It is extremely helpful to have an alternative energy source on a farm because certain functions just have to go on, like milking the cows. If electricity is lost then one might as well throw the milk down the drain. So in order to avoid that possibility a gas generator should be on hand. Thirdly, the agrarian lifestyle generates a tasty and highly nutritious food source that is little affected by inflation.

All of these points add up to make one very big point; and that point is that the agrarian lifestyle helps to eliminate a dependent lifestyle in many ways. The lifestyle eliminates dependency upon other labor sources as it trains up the farmer’s family. It eliminates dependence upon other sources of labor by requiring the learning of many skills rather than just one or two. A farmer has to be multi-talented for he has to be a gardener, mechanic, and animal husbandman all in one. Living in the country often necessitates fixing it yourself or paying a handsome sum otherwise. Agrarian living also eliminates dependence upon one source of power. A farm must have an alternative source. Finally, it eliminates dependence upon the
grocery store in that many of their own vegetables are grown on the farm and many animals are raised and slaughtered right there.

This independent, self-sufficient lifestyle had come under attack in the past history of our country. The most notable example is that found in the War Between the States. The North had an industrial, centralized, manufacturing economy with a dependent labor force. The South had an agrarian, decentralized economy with a labor force having a greater amount of diversity in its skill level allowing for more independency. The North scoffed at the South, looking to its own large cities and mills and swaggering with its belly full of power. The North did not realize that the small Southern entrepreneur had a different kind of steel forged from the fires of responsible small business practice tempered with the resiliency of a diversified labor force which had managed to produce a very strong economy. Like Goliath laughing at David’s five small stones, the North would soon learn how difficult it would be to fight this David.

A centralized system of labor with its large factories and assembly line production specializes labor into many particular tasks which are simple and repetitive. The laborer’s skill development is minimal thus limiting his general usefulness. With only a couple of these specialized skills he becomes dependent on his particular task; and if that that particular function is eliminated, his marketability to find comparable paying work is extremely diminished. An employer would find this kind of situation advantageous and can easily exploit the weakness of the laborer, virtually putting him in a place of slavery.

The centralization of utility companies has allowed them to grow to tremendous proportions and their real and political power has become great. Many customers are required by law to subscribe to their services, and the law frequently forbids many alternative sources of power generation by private citizens. The State of California is now reeling under such circumstances. Many are suffering under the power shortage and have no alternatives.

Food production has also become centralized. The small one hundred-acre “Ma and Pa” farm has been replaced many times over by the large corporate farm. The effect has been the elimination of the local grocery store and the advancement of the super-supermarket. Produce from the corporate fields flow into the central processing plant and it goes from there to the gigantic superstore. But in the meantime the freshness is often lost while the preservatives are added. All of this is done in the name of shelf life and to the glory of the big enterprise. Unfortunately the “progress” is at the expense of the health of the people, economically and physically.

These centralized operations generate gigantic revenues that frequently are used to influence government policies. Taxes, permits, and licenses are levied with a purpose to destroy the competition. “Ma and Pa” businesses have been taxed, regulated, and undersold practically out of existence. Consequently, their vote and voice is hardly heard.

Those who seek power and control have mounted such attacks against those who seek to live responsibly with a reasonable amount of independence. Financial and governmental pressures certainly overwhelm in a physical way. Greater damage occurs through the socialist philosophy that pressures all to conform to the ways of this system. Non-conformity then
becomes a sin. At the root of it all is a spirit of covetousness and greediness. Along with this is an envy which disdains and seeks to eliminate all who do not comply.

This kind of centralized system is hardly a panacea. A prime example is the nation of Zambia where the ambassador to the U.S.A. told a group of men that his country could not afford “free” education and “free” medicine. The socialist ideal ran out of money. The pork barrel split and the economy spilled out onto the floor. The masses of dependent people now had to go out and find work. Untrained, unskilled, the whole nation went through some growing pains as it worked to get back on its feet. Could this be America’s future?

If this could be America’s future, what was America’s past? In its recent past many families had businesses. Children could even have lemonade stands. Youthful enterprise was encouraged. Invention was nurtured and alternative sources of power were developed in their own small ways. Food tasted better and had fewer additives and people were healthier. What has happened? The answer is that our liberties have come under attack and are diminishing with each passing year. Labor regulations, food regulations, power restrictions, permits here, licenses there, here a “crat”, there a “crat”, everywhere a bureaucrat. And yet our children (as a whole throughout the nation) are not as healthy or intelligent or skilled as they were in times past. Added to these problems are fewer raw materials with which to experiment and invent and growing inflation that robs us of our ability or incentive to create and advance in culture. Though many feel that things are fine, in reality we and our children are facing struggles like never before. Sin, greed, and covetousness are abounding in our land and are robbing us all. Those who practice such wickedness have gained office in our land, helping to create our present state of affairs.

Do the Scriptures teach agrarianism? The answer is no. Certain aspects of agrarianism, however, are quite biblical. A biblical agrarianism involves a lifestyle of personal responsibility, hard work, independence, and reliance upon God rather than government. It involves family enterprise and unity as they work together to succeed in this world. This is a spirit the Church needs to encourage. Our country may be headed for a recession. If a recession comes the Church needs to be ready. Whether it comes or not, we know that our Lord will be return! We need to be ready by being found faithful and busy concerning His work. If we are, then we will again take our place in history, as the Church has in the past, of being the preservative of culture while the world rots and decays around us. “What is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.”