



Rural America in Crisis: An Unprecedented Call for a Christian Environmental Ethic

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I am grateful for this opportunity to bring to the reader's attention once again that creation indeed is in crisis. The historically unprecedented question is this: For how much longer can our natural environment sustain human abuse? Never before has humanity confronted this question, involving such complex issues as soil loss, deforestation, fresh water degradation, possible global warming, ozone shield erosion, species extinction, desertification, and the demise of the farmer and rural community. Within, and contributing to this massive problem is the crisis in rural America. Ethically, we are adrift. During the past two centuries of scientific and industrial expansion, we have lost our way. The crisis we experience and the ethical challenge which emerges from it have to be addressed forthrightly. There are no options.

I. THE PROBLEM AND EMERGING QUESTIONS

In recent years families have left the farm in thousands. Present farm legislation, even before final budget cuts, may escalate those numbers in the decade of the 1990s.¹ It is then not at all surprising that at this writing the GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariff) discussions have collapsed because of seemingly insurmountable problems involving the rural sectors and agricultural activities of the participating nations.

The crisis we address involves social, environmental, technological, and ethical issues. In the social sphere, individuals, farm families, and their rural commu-

¹For some relevant statistics, see the companion essay in this issue by Anne Kantén, family farmer and former Assistant Commissioner of Agriculture in Minnesota, "The Environmental Challenge in Rural America," especially pp. 165-166.

nities are caught in a merciless depression. The values of nutrition, national food security, home, sustainability, appropriateness, culture and community, meaningfulness in work, nature's wisdom, and the welfare of future generations have been set aside for profit, property, productivity, bigness, industry, technological cleverness, convenience, individualism, and only the welfare of the present.² Within the environmental sphere, soil loss is annually on the increase, even beyond the losses experienced during the "Dirty Thirties." Maintenance of fresh water quality is becoming the nation's most serious problem. Food safety is running a close second.

Although planetary security depends upon the maintenance of biological diversity, mono-cropping, even to the extent that livestock production is disappearing from the farm landscape to feedlots, continues to diminish the foundation of our real security system.

Technologically, our national food system—even the global system—is almost entirely dependent on *heavy* inputs of fossil fuel in the form of fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, power, transport, processing, and marketing. World oil and gas resources, both known and predictable discoveries, will be gone by the middle of the next century. Our whole food system, from the farm to the supermarket in the growing and distant cities, is simply not sustainable.³

Ethically, we are in a wilderness. Environmental ethics—the expansion of social ethics—is simply not discussed in seminaries and churches, let alone the society at large. Even though significant work exists in the field of business, marriage, medical, and legal ethics, nothing of real significance in the field of agricultural ethics has been developed.⁴ The nations, and certainly our own nation, have never asked the question What is good agriculture? We simply assume that this question is answered along the lines of maximum yields per acre, which perpetuates the illusion of productivity since the full costs are not counted.

It is no wonder that we now, at this late date in the history of American agriculture, have to ask the following questions: For how much longer can our present system and structure of agriculture continue before it collapses? How will the nation, with great percentages of its population living in the megacities located by and large within a hundred miles or so of sea coasts and major lakes, be able to feed itself? Do rural people, their farmers, local industries, and communities, even with their churches, count anymore? Is our society at all organized with the health and welfare of the land and future generations in mind? Do we have a positive, responsible, and creative vision for the future of the American rural community and its agriculture? Are the churches organized so that the crisis of rural America can be strategically addressed? Are the churches addressing the need for theological and biblical reflection essential for the emergence of sound environmental and agricultural ethics? If we are honest, we have to confess that at present the responses to these questions, at best, are few and far between.

²A full discussion of these professed and preferred values can be seen in Fred Kirschermann, “Values and Policy: A Thought Piece” (Unpublished paper, 1989).

³A fundamental description of our dependency on fossil fuels in American agricultural production is developed in David and Marcia Pimentel, *Food, Energy and Society* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979).

⁴A first attempt to develop an agricultural ethic can be found in C. Dean Freudenberger, *Global Dust Bowl: Can We Stop the Destruction of the Land before It's Too Late?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990).

II. THE BIBLICAL HERITAGE: THE GIFT OF LAND IN COVENANT

Western Christianity has been extremely weak in proclaiming a gospel of creation. Part of the reason may be that we have deviated far from the conviction of the divine ownership of the land and the equal share of all families in the use of it. In the Old Testament, God is acknowledged as landowner. “The earth is the Lord’s.” No generation and no individual has the right to call the land its own or to do with it as one pleases.⁵ This special relation between the people and the land was a central article of faith for both Jews and the early Christian community. Miraculous it is that in all history, Israel alone, a foreigner in the land, managed to establish a particular soil, to convert it into a “holy land,” and to inextricably bind up its own destiny and struggle to build a redeemed society with the land. The gift of land is intimately connected to the stability of community. In the Bible, human beings are part of the land, and community must be preserved. When the basic reverence for the land is ignored, it is only too

easy for people to be moved around without their consent, for communities to be broken up, and for boundaries to be manipulated.

In the gift of creation God fulfills not only our needs but those of every living thing. God sets boundaries to the waters and establishes the earth, and sends streams in which the wild beasts can quench their thirst. God gives pastures to the cattle and bread to human beings, bestows wine and oil on them, plans trees for birds, places the wild beasts in the mountains, sets the moon to make the festivals, and regulates darkness and light. Indeed the earth, the garden, is a gift to be celebrated and received with joy. We are responsible for tending and caring for this land, remembering that it can never be a possession in the sense of a piece of private property. In profound thanksgiving we must sustain the fragile bonds between the land, the people, and God, the Creator.

The Israelites, like the faithful in our time, perceived the universe as being sustained by the relationship between the Creator and creation. This was a relation of covenant, by which the whole of life was understood as dependent on God. The covenant was not a national principle; rather, it was the ground of unity of the creation. At Creation, God made a “covenant” with nature, giving each part of nature its own category or “niche” (Gen 1:11). According to Jeremiah, God has a covenant with day and night and has set laws for heaven and earth (Jer 33:20, 25). In Hebrew thought, the covenant is not a thing to be dealt with as one pleases. It goes deeper than everything else because it is the presupposition of all life. Covenant is holy. One is born of a covenant and into a covenant, and, wherever one moves in life, one makes a covenant or acts on the basis of an already existing covenant. If everything that comes under the term of covenant were dissolved, human existence would fall to pieces because no one can live an isolated life. Not only can we not get along without the assistance of others, it is in direct conflict with our essence to be something apart, to work and act without working in connection with and through others. Therefore, the annihilation of the covenant would not only

⁵This conclusion is developed in Odil Hannes Steck, *World and Environment*, Biblical Encounters Series (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).

be the ruin of society, but the dissolution of each individual and the integrity of creation itself.

The covenant of the land, too, is conditional upon a certain relation to God. The land must be kept holy. It is not to be defiled or polluted by breaking the divine commandments which spell out the covenant between God and Israel. As the promise of the land is a part of the fulfillment of the covenant with God, so the threat of expulsion from the land can be the judgmental side of a warning not to break the commandments. There is an intimate relationship between the nature of the land and the people who dwell in it, a relation made possible because the land itself is alive. The Israelites did not acknowledge the distinction between the psychic and the material world. Earth and stones are alive. The relation between the land and its owner is not that of a dead mass to a living mass—an impossible thought in the Hebrew tradition. It is a covenant relation, a community, and the owner does not solely prevail in the relation. The land has its own nature which demands respect.

There are a number of rules to be observed in relation to the land. Its blessing must be tended and its nature not violated. The blessing to be fruitful points everything in creation to its Creator, the originator of all life. Humanity is affirmed as being totally in the world of the living.

Our total earthly existence is blessed: our creatureliness, our worldliness, and our earthliness. If we maintain the blessing, it will be expressed in the land. The blessing is in the field and in the pastures. Mountains and hills are covered with peace and righteousness (Ps 72:3) which fills the barns and yields fodder for the cattle. The brooks carry water in abundance, the rain pours down, the valleys wave with the blessed grain, the hills are clothed with flocks of sheep (Ps 65:10-14), the mountains flow with new wine, and the hills flow with milk and all the rivers flow with water (Joel 4:18, Amos 9:13). Likewise the responsibility and obligation of the farmer—as well as modern agri-business enterprises—is to deal kindly with the earth, to uphold its blessing, and then take what it yields on its own accord. The farmer who exhausts it attacks its soul and kills it. After that, it will only bring forth thorns and thistles.

“Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). Adam’s tasks to “cultivate” and to “keep” the land seem out of place in this divine garden, but they are understandable as terms of the covenant and sacred history. The verbs “cultivate” (serve) and “keep” are used frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures for the service of God and the keeping of God’s commandments. They express responsibility and point to God’s covenant. Gen 2:15 asserts the purpose for humans being in the garden—to work it and to preserve it from all damage. This two-fold custodianship involves working upon and changing what is given as well as preserving the resources.

The present situation in our society and in our churches calls urgently for an ethic of responsibility built on this deeper understanding of our relationship to land. This is not a call for a return to the nineteenth-century ethic of adoration of land or nature or its twentieth-century counterpart, the cult of the simple, rustic life, that has prompted countless Americans to turn away from the social challenges of our world. The model is neither the romanticized primitive jungle or the modern technological wasteland, but rather the model expresses itself in a new command to learn to cultivate the garden. Our interventions can be creative and lastingly successful, if the changes we introduce are compatible with the intrinsic qualities

of the land we try to shape. Whenever we penetrate into the world of nature, we must cooperate with its own life, thus assuring insofar as we are able, its continuance in its created place. Thus Israel was commanded to let the land lie fallow so that the poor and the wild beasts could eat (Exod 23:11). We need to order our lives so that the whole of nature, including wild nature, can flourish.

There are limits. The Bible regards it as our duty to use nature, not to abstain from using it. But we must use it as children of God and in obedience to God’s will. Our use or abuse of nature has far reaching results in the whole structure of the land. Our dominion is limited by the rights of the land itself. Established and shaped by God, the land has its own integrity. God’s word commands us to respect the land rather than to exploit it or to manipulate it compulsively.

The ethic of responsibility to sustain the land has an intricate balance not unlike the balance of nature (creation) itself. Both worship and spoliation of the land are incompatible with the biblical understanding of creation. Ancient people who worshiped nature could never get far enough away from it to study it and use it to enrich their lives. On the one hand, we modern people, who ravage nature and the land, ultimately destroy ourselves as well. We forget how much a part of the land we really are, and we fail to see how deeply we wound ourselves, both

physically and spiritually, when we destroy the beauty and harmony of the land.

It would be wrong to think that we can simply turn to the Bible to find a solution to the ecological dilemma. However, the biblical motif of human dominion over creation calls into question present practices of exploitation and summons us to a new responsibility to serve the land entrusted to us.⁶ Religion can formulate a new environmental ethic that relates us to the land and emphasizes our responsibilities for its preservation. A new ethic is needed that will transcend most of the traditional contemporary values concerning the land. Rather than exploiting, diminishing, and destroying the land, we must sustain it now and for future generations. This encompasses the whole system of the land—the rivers, soils, oceans, atmosphere, magnetosphere, and now outer space. This ethic incorporates the rich Judeo-Christian heritage of a land that does not belong exclusively to us. We are entrusted to care for the land—to till it and keep it. We are trustees but not owners.

It is admirable to be deeply committed to the well-being of the present generation of human beings who here and now inhabit the land. It is equally commendable for persons living today to become increasingly concerned about the future of their children and their children's children. These two commitments must be held together constantly. As important as this is, an ethic of responsibility for sustaining the integrities of the land must extend even beyond this highly humanitarian concern in responsibility for the welfare of the whole natural environment. Whatever society we construct, or whatever energy system we design, we should leave the earth at least as fertile, as diverse, and as beautiful as it was before. In the same way, the principle of justice must be extended from its normal reference to what is due to individuals and communities to what is due to plants, animals, and water.

The shock that recognition of finitude brings requires not only greater rever-

⁶For a development of this theme, see James Limburg's companion essay in this issue, "The Responsibility of Royalty: Genesis 1-11 and the Care of the Earth."

ence for life but also a concern that the natural world around us not be treated unjustly. Only in this way will we help to keep alive and expand the parameters of evolution. The Creator wills that all creation should live and create further life. Our experience and our faith lead us to declare that we are called to be co-creators with God in the ongoing process of creation. We share God's power to project possibilities for the future. We envision the world not only as it is but also as it might be. So let us begin the task of bringing those possibilities to fruition. God has given us the ability to bring order out of chaos, to shape meaningful objects from the earth's substance, and to cultivate, sustain, and enhance this "gift of land."⁷

III. RURAL AMERICA IN CRISIS: COVENANT GIFT OF LAND AND THE CALL FOR A CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC

In rural America today there is no social justice, simply because our agricultural science, technology, and industry is not sustainable. Seen from the biblical perspective of land as covenant gift, the situation is of crisis proportion. What is happening to the environment of the land, rural people, and their communities is the antithesis of the wisdom of the biblical tradition. The crisis challenges to the core our sense of integrity and our sense of what it means to be the people of God. Spoliation of land is incompatible with the Bible. Land as creation is alive; it has

its own integrity. The land is holy. It is of intrinsic, not instrumental or utilitarian value, and we are inextricably related to its destiny. The land is foundational for social justice as an intergenerational and inter-species matter.

Whoever we are, wherever we live, be it an urban, suburban, or rural setting, we are entrusted with covenantal care for the land. We are not to claim it or to possess the land. Rather, we are to be its trustees to assure that it will continue and flourish, that its health be assured and enriched. We have been created with the potential to purposively shape our relationships with the land in creative and enhancing ways. In the New Testament experience of resurrection faith, “Behold all things are made new!” the impossible—life wrenched from the clutches of death—becomes possible.

Thus emerges a Christian environmental ethic: *A right relationship, a right act, sustains and enhances the integrities of the land.* This ethic assumes that the health of the land is the basis for justice in the human social sense. In our time of growing ecological awareness, we are beginning to recognize the inextricable relationships of nature.⁸ Looking at this ethic from its flip side, if our actions—our lifestyle, value system, science, industry, social and economic order—do not sustain and enhance the land, then our actions are wrong, and may God have mercy on us if we do not change our ways! To so expand human morality about social justice to include the

⁷The concept of enhancement in environmental ethics is fully developed in Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World, Ethics and Action* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1988).

⁸One of the central points of discussion at the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which met at Canberra, Australia in February, 1991, was the interdependent relationships of peace, justice, and the integrities of creation. This theme was also discussed at the March, 1990, Seoul, Korea meeting of the Commission of Church and Society; see the document “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” (Geneva: WCC, 1990).

land is an awesome challenge.⁹ Only in resurrection faith is it possible to say, “...nevertheless, thy will be done.”

A Christian agricultural ethic will help shape a vision of a sustainable future and serve both as goal and guideline. It will also function as a perspective for evaluation of our present situation. The basis of the ethic is that responsible agriculture enhances the natural system with which it interacts. The guidelines for such an agriculture are that species be preserved, health and the fertility of the land increase from generation to generation, beauty and justice in personal and community relationships be experienced, and that agricultural technologies for the production of goods and fibers be self-reliant and regenerative. The goals of a responsible agriculture from a biblical perspective are the achievement of beauty by enhancing the relationships of land, agriculture, and society, and contributing to the common unity of land, life, and the care of the earth.

Strategy for actualizing these goals requires a major commitment of society to conduct research for the development of an agroecology.¹⁰ The rehabilitation and enhancement of the rural community as rapidly as possible is a necessity. Legislation for the development of codes of compliance for the protection of prime farmland for the present and future and to control production and pricing in order to secure economic and social stability for farming families and their communities is likewise a necessity.¹¹ From a Christian environmental perspective, the efficiency of responsible agriculture will be measured in terms of self-reliance on a regenerative

basis, enhancement of relationships between the land, society, and the agricultural sector, and by the ability of each nation to feed its own people except in emergencies. The foundational values of a responsible agriculture, viewed from the perspective of a Christian environmental ethic of sustainability and enhancement, are the health of the future of the land, the quality of human relationships with the land (trusteeship for enhancement), and justice (social, environmental, species) and integrity in work and relationships. Christians find their moral motivation rooted in gratitude for life and to the Creator of life, a sense of responsibility born in the biblical heritage of covenant and in the sense of human purposive caring for the earth.

IV. THE CHALLENGE OF A CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC IN TIME OF CRISIS

However simply this ethic can be stated—*A right relationship, a right act, sustains and enhances the integrities of the land*—and however clear the understanding that the health of the land is foundational for justice, still our prevailing cultural values, sense of social priority, agriculture, theology, ethics, and our understanding of tasks of ministry are all awesomely challenged. The ethic shifts our human preoccupations so that we move beyond a hierarchy of values, with its self-serving

⁹For one of the most helpful histories of environmental ethics see Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*, History of American Thought and Culture (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989).

¹⁰The subject of agroecology is as vast as it is complex. One of the best collections of essays is C. Ronald Carroll, John H. Vandermeer, and Peter Rosset, eds., *Agroecology, Biological Resource Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990).

¹¹The various aspects of the legislative task are presented in C. Dean Freudenberger, *Food for Tomorrow?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 136-139.

anthropocentrism, to a new ecological mode of thinking. By this new paradigm, because it recognizes the depths of interdependency and integrity, all things are seen as intrinsic in value from their contribution to the health of the whole. Our notion of time is expanded so that the future, as well as the present, is of central value. Our understanding of freedom comes to include the responsible choice, as trustees and creators in covenant with the land, to contribute in sustaining and enhancing ways to its care. Our society needs to reshape and expand its priorities so that greater attention and commitment be given to the renewal, preservation, and enhancement of the integrities of the land; food safety and security; the movement of people to the new megacities at the expense of the rural sector; and to research—particularly at our tax-supported state universities and their colleges of agriculture—for sustainable agricultural futures.

Certainly, the present rural and agricultural crisis calls for an environmental ethic which will judge and challenge the nation to redevelop the rural sector of our national community. Without a caring and nurturing population of primary producers, an agro-ecology—with its system of biological and solar-intensive management of the nation's thousands upon thousands of micro-biotic communities—cannot be conceived. Farming is a living, nurturing, biotic, community affair. It cannot be nurtured and cared for from distant command posts. Agriculture is not like a factory assembly line, where tools can be set aside and inputs controlled. Agriculture requires an internal knowledge of the limits and potentials of living organisms and of all the incalculable variability of each and every micro-environment.

This ethic also challenges us to expand our theology to include a greater reflection of the whole majesty of creation and of our relation to it. In Christian theology, redemption includes the earth itself. The earth, the land, and its creative process, so magnificently described in Ps 104, is much more than the stage upon which the drama of human redemption is performed. The crisis of creation challenges the Christian community to regain its nearly lost ethos of a theology of creation and the covenant of the gift of land.¹² The environmental ethic further challenges us to evolve our sense of morality to include not only the human species and its rights, but the integrities and rights of creation itself. Finally, this ethic suggests additional tasks for ministry in our time of crisis. Ministry needs to enable the whole society to consider the human purpose of caring for the land—keeping and cultivating the garden. The churches are challenged to say it like it is, as unpopular as this may be, in order to help society recognize the magnitude and urgency of the crisis. Such ministry will recognize crisis as an opportunity for significant, positive change, because our biblical heritage enables us to envision a different future for the land, agriculture, and the rural community within the social, technical, and economic order which is not only sustainable but enhancing. It will enable our culture to regain its sense of reverence for the land not as a commodity to use but as holy, unearned gift, given freely by God’s grace. In its witness to the redemptive love of God in Christ it will cast the judgment of unacceptable upon the state of the crisis of creation. Ministry will finally encourage a new sense of ethical

¹²For a precise statement of the theology of creation, see Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 85-117.

motivation that avoids the treacherous waters of enlightened self-interest. Simply stated, as trustees in local communities and in national society, we accept the gift of land in covenant out of a sense of gratitude to the Creator of all.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The call for a Christian environmental ethic arises from the rural American crisis, which is a part of the whole creation in crisis. The ultimate question, heard repeatedly through the centuries, is this: Will the nations heed their prophetic voices? Will society respond to the need for new self-understanding, new structures and systems, and new science and technology that can be sustaining and enhancing? There is no historical precedent for this to happen.¹³ But there is no other option except the route of paralysis or blind optimism. Faith never counts the costs nor the odds for success. The compelling vision of God’s reign on earth “as it is in heaven” keeps us ever restless with what is and pushes us toward making impossibility possible. This is what the cross and resurrection of Christ is all about. This is what Christian discipleship is all about. Declaring that impossibilities are possible, even in the midst of a crisis of historically unprecedented magnitude, is what the call for a Christian environmental ethic and the vision it articulates is all about.

¹³For a challenging story of the role of the prophetic voice in classical Western history, see J. Donald Hughes, *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1975).