



The Family Farm as Christian Witness

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THE FAMILY FARM HAS STOOD AS A SYMBOLIC WITNESS TO IMPORTANT VALUES of the Christian faith, a clear alternative to the culture of consumption. At its best it has actually embodied those values; but even when it falls short, it stands as one symbol of full human life under God. In the family farm, Christians can glimpse at least part of what God intends for work and family.

My thesis is simple: the family farm (at least as an ideal) is a symbolic expression of major Christian values. The possible demise of family farms raises questions about the kind of future our society and our congregations want to build. In this essay, I begin with an “exegesis” of four facets of the family farm: the farm as an enticing image; as a cluster of values; as a place where real people live and sweat and relate to each other; and as an instrument to instruct Christian congregations about the activity of God. Second, I will demonstrate the theological and moral themes the ideal family farm has modeled and can continue to exemplify for

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The ideal of the family farm, still visible beneath the stark economic and social realities of contemporary rural life, offers an instructive vision of healthy work and family life. That vision calls into question much of present American culture and provides a pattern to model efforts at reform.

the culture and the congregation. Finally, I will suggest that congregations look to the family farm to discover truths and values that were once familiar to them and might still be.

I. WHAT IS THE FAMILY FARM TO US?

1. *The image of the family farm is one that continues to have great power to entice North Americans.* It reaches into our souls and finds a responsive chord. Many of our nursery rhymes were born on the farm: "baa, baa, black sheep," "this little piggy went to market," etc. Our legislators still evoke beautiful pastoral scenes to support or oppose various statutes.

What explains this powerful attraction? Part of the answer lies in the way the family farm combines work and family. The image bespeaks an integration of work and family life that has all but disappeared in affluent societies; it embodies a reality that many contemporary Americans crave. This integration of work, marriage, child rearing, natal and nuclear families, closeness to land, and intimacy with other natural processes has a great attraction for those of us who find ourselves pulled between work, family, and everything else. Rural homesteads stand in contrast to the fragmentation we feel and evoke a powerful symbol of "home-making." Unfortunately, for many rural families that picture is more projection than reality, more symbol than real. The power of the myth still exists, however, in the ideal.

2. *The family farm expresses a set of values that may appear both anachronistic and ideal.* We will consider only two of those values here: the particular type of community and the alternative to thoroughgoing materialism exemplified in a healthy (or ideal) rural culture.¹

The rural family tends to experience *community* as a total, all-pervasive reality whereas urban and suburban dwellers tend to experience community as chosen, time-limited commitments.

For long-term residents of rural America, community is experienced as a total institution. It is the community of residence, education, work, and extended family into which one was born. It pervades one's life in countless ways, ways that seem almost foreign to an urbanite. Rural people may *perceive* their home as a total community, even if it excludes a large number of people of color or of different income levels who also live in the area.

By way of contrast, when urban people speak of community they mean self-chosen, activity-specific, commitment-limited gatherings of people. Feelings of intimacy may be strong at such times and the associations enjoyable; however, association has definite boundaries. Urban churches may provide this sort of community for many members; rural churches still tend towards a sense (or at least the expectation) of total community.

Rural peoples who grew up with the experience of total community may find

¹There is evidence that the total community does exist in some locales; see John J. Beggs, et al., "Revisiting the Rural-Urban Contrast: Personal Networks in Nonmetropolitan and Metropolitan Settings," *Rural Sociology* 61/2 (1996) 306-325.

that as they move away from the country they move into different kinds of communities. Similarly, rural peoples may find others moving into their community who expect to choose their activities and associations. This changes the nature of rural community—and hence work and family—for both long-term residents and newer arrivals.

The rural community and especially the family farm can offer an *alternative to materialism*. At its best the family farm is participatory, sustainable, and fair to all its members. The image of being at home in the good community suggests a security and peace that undercuts the obsessive motors of materialism, which are scarcity and fear. It may also emphasize the authentic but limited value of material enjoyment and delight.

Many farm families were among those who had to deal with reduced economic prospects and financial loss during the most volatile years of the agricultural economy. Some have come to terms with materialism and have learned to face its challenges. As M. Friedberger notes, “It is possible that farm families were pioneers in learning to face, with lowered expectations, a future of declining living standards and limited business growth. More and more Americans may have to learn the same hard lesson in the next decade.”² It may be that materialism will be challenged by the limits of the Social Security system, by environmental limits, by the inequities of income distribution in this country, or by the alienation from the political and economic system that many rural peoples feel.³ The necessity of dealing with material diminishment may be the mother of a considerable virtue. It has enabled many rural people to see the possibilities for transforming their work and family lives in faithful and life-giving ways.

3. *The family farm is a place where real people live and work.* The family farm is not only symbolic or instructive or value-laden, it is real. Indeed, though less than two percent of the population live on family farms, the industries associated with farms and rural communities make farming a significant primary industry. Many of the other 23% of the U.S. population that lives in rural America retain a connection with the farm.

In discussing the state of families on farms, we must differentiate among the relatively large number of small, part-time, hobby, or retirement farms (“part-time farm”); the very large, highly industrialized farms (“industrial farm”); nonfamily hired laborers (“farm labor”); and the traditional family farm owner-operators (“family farm”). All these are farm populations distinct from “urban nonfarm” and “rural nonfarm.”⁴ The Albrechts discovered that the greatest differences among these groups existed between farm and nonfarm people rather than between urban

²M. Friedberger, *Farm Families and Change in 20th Century America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988).

³See Rand Conger and Glen Elder, *Families in Troubled Times: Adapting to Change in Rural America* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994) 5, and Shannon Jung, “Rural Rage: Lessons from the Oklahoma City Bombing,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* (forthcoming 1997).

⁴These six categories are used by Don E. Albrecht and Stan L. Albrecht, “Family Structure Among Urban, Rural, and Farm Populations: Classic Sociological Theory Revisited,” *Rural Sociology* 61/3 (1996) 448–451.

and rural people. They found family farm incomes to be the lowest of the six groups. They also found that “the farm groups are significantly more likely to be characterized by married couples and significantly less likely to be female-headed.” On the index of “number of children under 18 and family size,” the industrial, farm labor, and family farm groups were “substantially different” from the other three.⁵ There is, in fact, support for the popular conception that it is farm families composed of a married couple and their children who own and work their farms.⁶

Farming provides the economic basis as well as the homeplace for the family. Conger and Elder found that economic pressures on the farm produced great distress which led, in many cases, to conflict and “disruptive” parenting.⁷ Included in those euphemisms are spouse abuse, usually wife battering, and child abuse. Another, related finding is that the percentage of individuals living below the poverty threshold is significantly higher in “not metropolitan” than in “metropolitan” areas, especially for people of color. In “metropolitan areas,” the overall rate was 13.4%—20.6% in “central city” areas and 9.1% in the “not central city” areas. In “not metropolitan” areas, the national poverty rate was 15.6%.⁸ The apparently lower rates of divorce, the high rate of poverty, and the economic pressures farmers face make it a fairly safe bet that the real rate of spouse and child abuse is significant among farm families.

Currently many people experience a tension between the world of work and the world of family. This tension has been exacerbated in rural America, especially among those farm families who survived the worst years of the agricultural depression of the 1980s.⁹ Most (55.5%) farm families have turned to nonfarm income to keep the farm solvent, or at least to keep cash flowing. That has been a decidedly mixed blessing. (Many of the rural poor have a job, and 25% of the rural poor have two jobs.)

The labor force in rural America is underpaid and has been the place where employers of migrant labor as well as discount stores and fast-food chains can still find people to work minimum-wage, no-benefit jobs.¹⁰ The family farm is now supported by the additional jobs taken on by the farm wife and husband after they finish the farm work; up to 83% of the income of the farm family now comes from off-farm sources. This means that many parents are not there when their children

⁵Ibid., 459.

⁶This also means that there are probably fewer divorces among farm families, though it is very difficult to locate statistics on what proportion of “farm marriages” come apart.

⁷Conger and Elder, *Families in Troubled Times*, passim, but especially p. 12.

⁸Ibid.

⁹On the extent and longevity of grief, see “Doing Worse and Feeling Worse: Psychological Consequences of Economic Hardship,” in Conger and Elder, *Families in Troubled Times*, chapter 8.

¹⁰“The median real wage for male workers has fallen steadily since 1973. For all but college-educated women in general, wages have fallen since 1989”; Lester Thurow, “Companies Merge; Families Break Up,” *New York Times* (September 3, 1995), quoted in Paula Cooney, *Family, Freedom, and Faith: Building Community Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 117.

come home in rural America. Even on the family farm, the family is seldom all together; they are out hustling low-wage jobs to make ends meet. The tension between economic life and family life is just as real on the farm as it is in suburbia.

4. *The family farm is one of the places where God is active; therefore, the Christian church can expect to learn from the farm family.* The family farm can challenge the church and offer a number of instructive moral lessons. We will turn in the next section to the perspectives that the Christian faith has to offer on the farm family; before that, let us note a few of the values embodied by the family farm that can instruct Christians. The family farm stands as an alternative to the American religion of success and consumption; too often the “family values” debate reveals a strong streak of classism. “Family values,” as often defined, are rarely accessible to those without a comfortable life style. Family farms can demonstrate that family values are not necessarily equated with consumption or individualistic, achievement-oriented success. Consideration of the farm can alert us to ask whether the church might sometimes be blessing family values that are not necessarily Christian.

The family farm can also recall us to our rootedness in the land and to the significance of human relationships. Wendell Berry suggests a connection between marriage and farming. Though Berry does not make explicitly Christian claims, we can receive his observations as part of God’s wisdom. “Marriage is made in an inescapable condition of loneliness and ignorance,” he writes, “to which it, or something like it, is the only possible answer.” This is hard to understand

because now the most noted solutions are mechanical solutions, which are often exactly suited to mechanical problems. But we are humans—which means that we not only *have* problems but *are* problems. Marriage is not as nicely trimmed to its purpose as a bottle-stopper; it is a not entirely possible solution to a not entirely soluble problem. And this is true of the other human connections. We can commit ourselves fully to anything—a place, a discipline, a life’s work, a child, a family, a community, a faith, a friend—only in the same poverty of knowledge, the same ignorance of result, the same self-subordination, the same final forsaking of other possibilities. If we must make these so final commitments without sufficient information, then what *can* inform our decisions?¹¹

Berry answers that

in spite of the obvious dangers of the word, we must say first that love can inform them....But our decisions can also be informed—our loves both limited and strengthened—by those patterns of value and restraint, principle and expectation, memory, familiarity, and understanding that, inwardly, add up to *character* and, outwardly, to *culture*....The real—the human—knowledge is understood as implying and imposing limits, much as marriage does, and these limits are understood to belong necessarily to the definition of a human being.

Despite all this talk about marriage, Berry insists that he has not forgotten that he was supposed “to be talking about agriculture....I want to insist that I have been

¹¹Wendell Berry, “People: Land, and Community,” in *Multi-Cultural Literacy*, ed. Rick Simonson and Scott Walker (St. Paul: Greywolf, 1988) 41–42.

talking about it indirectly all along, for the analogy between marriage making and farm making, marriage keeping and farm keeping, is nearly exact."¹²

Several of the words that Berry uses to draw this analogy between marriage and farming can be suggestive for the Christian church today: commitment, limits, self-subordination, forsaking, restraint, not entirely soluble, love. These words are of course not new to the Christian faith; they fall harshly on our ears because they are so much out of vogue now in our culture and possibly in our churches as well.

II. COMPASS POINTS FROM THE FAMILY FARM

We have examined the family farm as an enticing image, as a cluster of values, as a place with real people, and as a moral instructor. We turn now to the ways in which the farm is a Christian witness. This section will juxtapose the values that Berry surfaces as vital to the making of good marriages and good farms with several Christian beliefs central to work and family. The two sets can inform one another.

From the great body of wisdom that God has entrusted to the land and human farming, it is worthwhile to lift up a few elements—corporate salvation, the great community (read kingdom) of God, vocation, and an ethic of care—and to bring these into conversation with traditional beliefs. One prominent feature of this experiment is that it will reveal the physicality of both family and work in a way that traditional discussions often neglect.¹³

Farm families know in special ways that they need salvation and, in their more perceptive moments, know that their salvation must be corporate. Both good marriages and good farming overwhelm our notions of management and control. One must admit that the problems of both marriage and land are not entirely susceptible to human solution. Land and work, marriage and children are inherently problematic. As a society and as a church, we misread and distort these aspects of life if we see them as subject to mechanical solution or social engineering. They require instead corporate salvation, which respects their interrelatedness as well as the otherness of each person, each job, and of the land itself. Nothing here is fully subject to rational solution. Farm families have some inkling that their lives are not controllable; they know that there are forces that lie beyond strategic management, that the future is best lived in relation with others and in accepting whatever happens and responding to it as it unfolds. Good farming reminds us that the land (soil quality and weather) is part of the home, that it yearns for salvation as well. It is an integral part of our marital, economic, and household environment.¹⁴

¹²Ibid., 44–46.

¹³Theology has not directed its attention to the spatial/physical/material dimension of human life as it has to other dimensions. See Jung, "Ethics, Agriculture, and the Material Universe," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1989) 219–250.

¹⁴One implication of corporate salvation is a caution to the family farmer against becoming so identified with the farm (or the rural businessman with the town business) that we sacrifice family, self, and Christian discipleship to the well-being of the farm. See Val Farmer, "Putting the Farm First Harmful to the Family," *Farm & Ranch Guide* (September 9, 1994) 58.

Sometimes salvation is understood as wholeness or completeness. This becomes particularly evident when we lose the community-orientation of our lives. The “great community” of God (or kingdom of God) calls us to make our little communities function more and more “as it is in heaven.” The farm family requires a self-subordination and a recognition of limits if it is to become part of a rural community reflecting the interdependent great community. Those notions—self-subordination and the recognition of limits—sound quite counter-cultural these days. They are possible only for people who know they have a secure and vital place in the community. One can actually get a glimpse of this on the family farm, which retains an image and a shadow of the great community of God. The concrete and physical way that one can identify one’s own place alongside the place of grubworms, and the cultivation of humans and nonhumans in the whole design add specificity to the notion of the community. One can locate one’s role in the covenant that God has established with us.

The doctrine of corporate salvation and the accompanying community values emphasize the communal aspect of God’s purposes for family and work. The theme of vocation emphasizes the personal nature of work and family life. Luther and Calvin made clear that one’s work was a calling from God through which one was to mediate God’s grace and justice to others. This draws individual work into the public arena. Is the nature of my work and the quality of my family life consonant with the mediation of grace and justice? In Berry’s terms, such a commitment to family and to farming is irrational; it requires a forsaking of other possibilities—even other good possibilities. It necessarily involves restraint and discipline and limits. God calls us to specific jobs and specific marriages and specific children. All these are quite physical and need-specific. We may need to speak much more specifically about how and where we mediate grace and justice. Where is God acting in our work and in our families?

A final intersection between doctrine and farm is the most explicit. Berry suggests that only love can inform our decisions about work and family. Only love can transform them, enable forgiveness, and make tolerable and delightful decisions, even though they are necessarily made in ignorance. Farms and marriages produce delight only with great care. Work and family do not arrive as blocks that immediately fit (or not) when one partner pairs with another; one’s children do not fit their parents without mutual caring any more than parents fit their children. Neither is anyone’s work perfectly suited to them without effort. All these things require sacrificial love. While not neglecting this role of self-sacrifice (what parent—or farmer—could?), Don Browning asserts that the Christian ethic of equal regard should apply to the realms of marriage and work as well.¹⁵ Browning

¹⁵Browning argues for this ethic in several places—“Religion and Family Ethics: A New Strategy for the Church,” in *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Nancy Tatom Ammerman and Wade Clark Roof (New York: Routledge, 1995) 157–176; “Biology, Ethics, and Narrative in Christian Family Theory,” in *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*, ed. David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and David Blankenhorn (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996) 119–156; and “Christian Ethics and the Family Debate: An Overview,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1995) 251–262.

suggests that “love as equal regard applies to the wider society as well as to the conjugal unit,” with implications for economic and job policy, tax relief, flex time, adequate health insurance, and—I would add—farm policy. “The position promoted here,” he continues, “calls for both cultural rebirth and economic reconstruction.”¹⁶

III. FINDING OUR WAY HOME

The family farm is both familiar and distant. The familiarity of the image—not the reality—may obscure the very real challenges facing rural communities and farmers. Rural America is other than the untainted pastoral images so often employed. Those engaging images seldom include the rage that leads a few to join militias, the minority groups who are systematically exploited, or the traditional families whose closets hide incest, abuse, and alcoholism. The farm family has been under economic pressure for some time. Its life is endangered by current policy. Efforts at strengthening the American farm family will be severely inhibited in the absence of policies that enable families to earn a decent living without working 80 hours a week. Like all families, the farm family needs a living wage. The corporate farm with its vertical integration in the food supply system puts the medium-sized family farm at a considerable disadvantage. This is not an argument for federal subsidies, only a plea that family farms not be disadvantaged. The economic position of the average farm family has declined for 17 years. One way churches can address the decline is by supporting community supported agriculture projects (CSAs) in which people subscribe to a portion of a farm’s produce in season, thereby receiving not only healthy vegetables and fruits but also a sense of participation in the farm and a familiarity with land, animals, and others. With CSAs, farmers receive more income for their efforts.

Churches can also support efforts, where appropriate, to change federal policy. Economic policies that disadvantage farm families and promote family instability have their counterparts in policies that disadvantage urban families. Work that has dignity, meaning, and is justly compensated is integral to human fulfillment.

Children flourish more often in a two-parent home where both parents have good educations and are regular church attenders.¹⁷ The type of household in which one grows up is, of course, a function of many variables; many of them are fixed and involuntary, but some are remediable. Do our homes offer an alternative to the demonic religion of affluence and success? Do they offer stable relationships that reflect God’s faithful care? Do they offer a transforming perspective on the public world that witnesses to Christ’s salvation rather than Nike’s? Parents can deprive children by being timid in their witness to the Christian faith. Local congregations have been in the business of Christian education and formation for

¹⁶Browning, “Christian Ethics and the Family Debate,” 261.

¹⁷See Urie Bronfenbrenner et al., *The State of Americans* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

some time; they need to open their doors to the children of the community—as many rural churches are doing—and to operate as fully as possible as an extended family. They have a witness both to the economically disadvantaged kids of struggling farmers and laborers and to the “cornucopia kids” of affluent homes.¹⁸ Families have spiritual needs as well as economic needs. In the church and with its help, families can articulate the spiritual values of God’s trust, care, and acceptance to their children and to each other.

The family farm has a number of lessons to teach both the church and the society. When farm incomes were sufficient to support a family, the farm operated in a fairly egalitarian way—both husband and wife were work partners on the farm, and both were parents. There was a mixture of self-sacrifice and equal regard in the care of the farm and family. Without pressing the assertion too far, since legal and economic contingencies no doubt always disadvantaged farm women, there was, nevertheless, a functional egalitarianism on the farm long before gender equality became a matter of law. A second lesson of the healthy farm of an earlier era was its ability to operate on less capital; farmers had not become addicted to the level of income that threatens to engulf us in the idolatrous addiction of materialism. The farm family knew that life was more than work and that vocation was more wide-ranging than the eight hours spent on the job. Third, children were not perceived primarily as objects of self-sacrifice or impediments to self-fulfillment—they were not merely objects of need or consumption. Instead their work was meaningful and had its own integrity on the farm. The need we all share for mutuality and seriousness of place was a gift given to farm kids, even when they didn’t think it was much of a gift. They were taken seriously as the future, a future where both work and family had a secure foundation. Such a foundation in work and family reflects and reinforces the transforming power of the Christian faith.¹⁹ ⊕

¹⁸See a fine piece by Ann-Janine Morey and Todd Hedinger, “Cornucopia Kids and Parents: Bowing Down to Mammon,” *Christian Century* (January 31, 1996) 113–114.

¹⁹Christine Firer Hinze presented a provocative address on “Families as Conserving or Transforming Forces: Towards a Christian Feminist Ethic of Risk” (AAR national convention, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 23, 1996). The subtitle points to Sharon Welch’s *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).