



# A Theological Vision for Ministry in Rural America

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**T**HE CRISIS IN FARM COMMODITY PRICES HAS COME AROUND AGAIN. THE NEWS-  
papers record the continuing decline in prices and, with it, a loss of rural cul-  
ture. That cycle is old news. Fortunately the church does not deal with old news, or  
new news, but good news. The question for many rural congregations these days is  
where that good news is. This essay offers one answer to that question, which a  
growing number of congregations and Christian men and women are asking. What  
is the future of the church in rural America? Here, my aim is to offer one theologi-  
cal vision for the future of the church.

I begin with several frames indicating what is happening in rural America and  
why that matters. I do this by first asking, “Who has a stake in the land?” What is  
rural America to urban America? I then suggest an approach to the question of the  
future of rural congregations and communities that is neither blindly optimistic  
nor despairingly dreary. The bulk of this effort will be directed at some reflections

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*An appropriate theological vision for rural America will have to give up the no-  
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formance. It will have to learn to live in grace.*

on the question: Theologically, what is the way forward? Only when we get our faith bearings right can we approach the more strategic question of what the church has to say and how it should say it. What would a theology that knew its place suggest for the congregations there? What, indeed, is the future of Christian rural America?

### I. WHO HAS A STAKE IN THE LAND?

You know things are bad when the Twin Cities *Star Tribune* sends a reporter out to Bowbells, North Dakota. What Bob von Sternberg found there was that people were giving up on their small town. The older folks were packing it in, and the younger ones were on the way out, leaving an “empty middle”:

The heart of the fastest-shrinking county in the United States shrank a little bit more last week, when elevator manager Mark Grove packed up his wife and four kids and moved away....From western Minnesota to eastern Montana, from the Canadian border to the Texas panhandle, populations are dropping, farmers are giving up, Main Street businesses are shutting and schools are closing....

If something isn't done, we are going to lose an entire culture. And people closest to the edge have begun talking resignedly....“If you're in a high-amenity place like Brainerd or the Madison River Valley in Montana, life is good. But in between, it isn't. People in the empty middle are really struggling.”...“It's gotten so depressing around here it's unbelievable. So many people are getting out—it's a natural resource that's disappearing. *And urban people have to hear about it.*”<sup>1</sup>

Who has a stake in the land? If you asked a resident of Bowbells this question, she or he might tell you that they do; many of them remember that their grandparents came out to North Dakota; they remember the culture that accompanied making a living off the land, living on the land, and living with the land. Ask the residents of the eastern plains of Colorado or the Minnesota wheat country or Nebraska or many other places. They have a stake in the land and the communities that grew there. They love their place and can no longer live there. What is at stake? Local knowledge, local culture, knowledge of the natural and social history of that land, local identity, local worship—all are threatened.

A second frame: My friend Cheryl got salmonella poisoning. Cheryl has two artificial hips, and I had thought that they must be impervious to any bacteria or virus. But no. From eating some chicken with salmonella, Cheryl's hips got infected. The salmonella infection settled in those artificial joints and Cheryl almost died. Where does salmonella come from? From chicken that has been carelessly handled. From chicken that had been handled by someone who had no stake in her eating good food. From the sort of food supply system that puts great distances between the growing of the food, the handling and distributing, and the ultimate consumer. From a lack of craftsmanship, if you will. Who has a stake in the land?

<sup>1</sup>Bob von Sternberg, “The Empty Middle,” *Star Tribune: Newspaper of the Twin Cities*, 9 August 1998. Emphasis added.

A third moment, a reality that accompanies the realities of the first two, one that concerns the revolution in transgenic foods: The recent World Trade Organization talks in Seattle brought to a head the conflict between the European Union and the United States concerning transgenic food. It is ironic that the United States is pressing the EU to accept food that is at the least potentially unhealthy; it is also ironic that U.S. citizens may have the EU and Brazil to thank for resisting food the effects of which are not yet certain. Some reports suggest that plants that are fertilized and treated with herbicide transgenically have long-term negative impacts on the soil as well.<sup>2</sup>

A recent report on a variety of potato—the New Leaf Superior, which has been genetically engineered by Monsanto—was called “Playing God in the Garden.” The potato is designed to kill the Colorado potato beetle. This year, the fifth year that genetically altered seed has been on the market, saw over 45 million acres of American farmland planted with biotech crops, most of it corn, soybeans, cotton, and potatoes. Clearly, “Americans have already begun to eat genetically engineered potatoes, corn and soybeans,” but “industry research confirms that hardly any of us know it. The reason is not hard to find. The biotech industry, with the concurrence of the Food and Drug Administration, has decided we don’t need to know it.”<sup>3</sup>

The point is that we simply don’t know the impact of these drugs on human beings, though they appear to be unhealthy for monarch butterflies. The chemical that is central to the production of some transgenic crops is Bt, the same chemical that many organic growers depend upon to reduce pests without spraying or using many chemicals. The quantity of Bt that is being infused into the transgenic seeds is so great that insects will become resistant to the relatively small quantities that nontransgenic growers use. Is it cynical to think that large corporations know that they are creating insects that will make organic practices impossible to sustain because those insects will be resistant to naturally-occurring quantities of Bt? Do we know what we can eat safely anymore? The author of the *Times* piece closes his article by saying that he has a bag of these biotech spuds on his back porch and that he thinks he really should try them. But then, “The thing I like best about these biotech potatoes...is that I have this choice. And until I know more, I choose not.”<sup>4</sup> The growing concentration in the food supply system, with four or five major corporations controlling everything from choice of seed to fertilizer to growing practices to buyer to processor to distributor, makes the prospect of transgenic catastrophe more frightening. There will be no conspiracy here; we just won’t know.

And so I return to the question “Who has a stake in the land?” And the obvi-

<sup>2</sup>Report on National Public Radio, 2 December 1999.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Pollan, “Playing God in the Garden,” *New York Times Magazine*, 25 October 1998, 44-54, 62-64, 82, 92-93.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

ous answer is that whoever eats in this country, the United States, has a stake in healthy food and healthy land and healthy communities that will grow that food with pride and safety.

Who has a stake in the land? It doesn't take much to see that we all do.

The statistics about what is happening in rural farming communities take on an added poignancy in light of our stake in the land:

- prices for corn and soybeans and wheat are at depression-era levels
- hogs sold for eight cents a pound last winter
- incomes across the nation rose by 5% during 1998, at the same time that farmers were losing an additional 23.8% of their income
- other rural industries are losing sales
- it takes \$2.25 to raise a bushel of corn in Iowa; corn is selling at \$1.43 as I write
- it takes \$36 a hundredweight to break even raising hogs; they are selling for \$37 today

Pastor Leslie Weber of the Division for Church in Society, Evangelical Church in America, translates these statistics into human terms. "Behind the images of discouraged farmers are images of social breakdown. There is domestic abuse, alcoholism, stress-related illnesses, strained relations with lenders, decreased ability to care for aging parents, and especially in areas where farmers and ranchers co-exist with Native Americans, a worsening of race relations."<sup>5</sup>

## II. RESPONDING TO CRISIS

Those of us who either lived in farming communities or who followed the rural crisis of the 1980s have heard all this before, of course. That crisis saw multiple suicides; the continuing crises of the '90s saw, in addition, militia and blue-collar violence. What are the symptoms of the late '90s and early '00s? Sandy Simonson Thums, Program Coordinator for Lutheran Rural Response, says that she is hearing for the first time of farmer-versus-farmer violence, at least in North Dakota. But much of this sounds quite familiar; it is not hard to connect with the wrenching results of low commodity prices and farmers selling out while they can.

I notice in myself and others a resistance to thinking about this. Again? We're going through this again? We project an image of the church uttering empty words to the rage and powerlessness that is produced by faceless market forces that come on as inexorably as a three-story-high steel ball rolling over the land. That ball—call it corporatism, with Jim Hightower, or global trade or market adjustments—seems to roll over farms, towns, churches, and anything else that stands in its way. Our words are as dust, we churchpeople and theologians may feel; we are like grasshoppers in the face of such relentless force.

I notice my own reaction. What resources do we have to encounter this

<sup>5</sup>Letter to the editor, *Chicago Tribune*, 24 June 1998.

power? There is a fatalistic tone to that. How shall we change this? What is the solution? Do I really want to think about this—again? Isn't this a little passé, like last decade's news? Will any response matter, in the long or even short term? As I think about it, I realize that my question is a pale reflection of the farmer/rural people/rural pastor's question: Does God care? Does God notice? All responses seem so puny in this situation.

Then I realized that the wrong set of questions was exercising me. The questions all translated into "How shall we resolve this problem?"—a typical sort of clergy trap, thinking that we are the answer men and women, that we can solve this problem. That we are expected to solve this problem. That we expect ourselves to solve this problem. No wonder we want to avoid thinking about all this. The theologian, the ethicist, no less than the pastor, is subject to this trap.

Sharon Welch observes that anti-nuclear activists frequently grew cynical and lost heart, so their movement lost its staying power.<sup>6</sup> She suggests that they were wedded to the wrong goals. They thought that God had told them to solve the problem and that they had to perform, to effect a resolution, to get things changed. She suggests, instead, that God calls us to live in community with one another, to witness to the redeeming power of Jesus Christ, to stand with one another, to practice resistance in community. That changes my perspective, though I admit that I am continually in the process of conversion. We Christians are called to communicate the love of God: we are not called to change the world or to control it. U.S. Christians particularly need to hear that.

### III. THEOLOGICAL TRAPS

Let us proceed by first offering some parameters for what a vision for the rural church cannot be—what traps we want to avoid. What sorts of theological quicksand do we want to avoid in restoring this foundational habitat?

Then we can proceed to describe the features of terrain that we do want to build on—what a vision for the rural church should recognize and lift up. What foundations will be secure, appropriate, and lasting? Finally, what are our building blocks, what elements do we want to incorporate in our practice of being church?

What do we want to avoid? What has clearly been rejected as the basis of a vision for the rural church?

- Unhelpful are imported materials that do not fit the terrain, that do not speak to rural people's experience of God, that we think in our heads but don't feel in our bones.
- Especially pernicious are materials that only make God in our image, that do not challenge, or that attempt to rob God of transcendence—beginning or ending anywhere that does not account for God's full sovereignty, power, and love. And mystery.

<sup>6</sup>Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 43-47.

- The uncritical identification of Christian faith with success in the culture's terms—money, fame, avoidance of death, “official religion of optimism,” a thousand acres—is heretical.
- An authoritarian or hierarchical structure for the local congregation—one that shuns egalitarianism or fails to use all the gifts of the laity and clergy—is inadequate, as is any sense of inferiority or superiority.
- Though locally based, a Christian theology for the rural church should also avoid provincialism or jingoism; that is, it should be open to all peoples and all wisdom, remembering that all people and all wisdom come from God. We want to be locally global.
- Our work should be founded on scripture. Any so-called wisdom that does not square with biblical wisdom must be regarded as suspect. How one tests insights, strategies, and beliefs according to scripture is an important and very real concern, of course.
- A theology that is not ecological and physical will be unsatisfactory—a theology that does not touch us, that we cannot feel, smell, see, and hear. In many ways one could call this a theology of the land, as long as it is understood that *we* are part of the land.

#### IV. ELEMENTS OF A THEOLOGICAL VISION

What are some of the features of the theology we want to draw on?

Our starting point is christological and considers two great traditions of the church. The two traditions are not mutually exclusive, as both have to do with how one interprets the significance of the incarnation. According to frequent readings, the first, the Antiochene tradition, is most interested in preserving the God-man distinction—it is particularly concerned that the two natures of Christ not be conflated, that each receives its due. The danger that this theological tradition wants to avoid is the identification of the human and the divine; thus, it maintains that the human is not capable of the infinite, that the human cannot contain the infinite. The pitfall of the tradition is of course the reverse of its virtue: that it sets too great a distance between God and humankind. Thus it speaks of God accommodating Godself to human form, taking on a lesser nature.<sup>7</sup> This is my tradition, the Reformed, and it avoids idolatry fairly well. Or at least it knows when it has fallen into idolatry!

The other tradition is the Alexandrian, named for another of the great cities of the ancient world. This tradition emphasizes the unity of the two natures of Jesus Christ, and places the accent on the combination of the natures in the incarnation. Alexandrian Christianity would assert that the human is capable of the infinite, because the infinite has made it so. This tradition places a much higher setting on the extent to which the incarnation and redemption of the world has changed the nature of reality. If the Antiochene emphasizes the “not yet” of salva-

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, 1.1.

tion and the coming of the kingdom, then the Alexandrian emphasizes the “already” of salvation and the kingdom. The danger this setting wishes to avoid is to claim too little for the significance of the incarnation, to underestimate the extent of the work of grace. The pitfall of this tradition is that it can discount the importance of the law, which sometimes gets lost or neglected through an overemphasis on gospel. One danger here is a quietism or confusion about the role of human agency. This is the Lutheran tradition and one that I have learned from and appreciate.

Though I incorporate insights from my tradition, my starting point is based primarily on the central Christian beliefs in creation and incarnation of the Alexandrian tradition, that is, on the physical stuff of creation and of us. If God is indeed sovereign, you see, any starting point in human experience will lead to the divine (Reformed emphasis); or, since Jesus Christ has suffused the creation and demonstrated the wisdom of God in creation (Lutheran emphasis), then one can, in fact, begin with dirt, with nature, with us who are only temporarily not dirt.

Modern physics, of course, has altered our understanding of matter. Physics understands the atoms of matter as dynamic units, differing only in their organization.<sup>8</sup> In short, we are made up of the same stuff that badgers and Easter lilies, granite and clouds are; our molecules are arranged somewhat differently, but we are composed on the same basic building blocks. John and Mary Schramm suggested at one of our rural ministry conferences, somewhat more elegantly and much more enticingly, that all dirt is basically stardust—right down to the little dust bunnies that assemble under our beds.

Wes Jackson makes the same point: creation is a oneness. At the most basic level of all life, the DNA code consists of four nucleic acids.<sup>9</sup> Since it takes three of these acids to make one combination that will then code for a particular amino acid, of which there are twenty, there are sixty-four combinations of that code. The code for all life is universal. So, at the most basic level, the creation is as one, a unity that, Jackson says, needs to be talked about in churches. I think his point is that the combination of amino acids we call ourselves—human—is made up of the same basic stuff as leaves and flowers and animals.

Furthermore, says Jackson,

At the point in the process of evolution in which we finally have what might be called the full-blown eukaryotic cell, eighty percent of the time there has been life on earth has passed. Again, it doesn't matter whether we are a redwood or a whale, a human or a giraffe, a dog or a bull snake, a carrot or broccoli, wheat, potatoes, corn. It is the same sort of code, the same amino acids. Eukaryotes all! What has been developing in the evolution of eukaryotic organisms within the genomes of countless species are miniature ecosystems, nano-ecosystems, ecosystems at the genome level.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, *The Architecture of Matter* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 374-376.

<sup>9</sup>Wes Jackson, “The Oneness of the Creation: From Genomes to Ecosystems to the Life of Human Communities” (The 1997 Iowa Humanities Lecture), in *Muses: A Publication of the Iowa Humanities Board* 20/2 (1988) 6-8.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

As you know, there is a massive project underway to map the human genome. Perhaps the way in which these eukaryotic genomes/ecosystems have developed suggests something about the proper role of the humble gene splicer, the proper role of biotechnology and indeed of the human agent.

Most interesting to me about Jackson's perspective is how it suggests that God is working through the creation and incarnation in an Alexandrian sort of way. It calls us to explore what it would mean for the rural church to think more in harmony with God's activities for creation and redemption here and now, rather than with the sort of distantiation implied in the formula of trying to fulfill God's purposes in the here and now—in other words, to think in terms of mindfulness and inner rhythm rather than in terms of willpower and outward performance.

One of my reasons for wanting to build on this foundation is because I believe rural communities and churches in general have a greater appreciation than others for the physical, for bodies, and for land itself. There is wonderful theological precedent for beginning with God and with God's creating, of course. In this age of electronic communication and instantaneous money transfers we in the rural community remember that meaning is not context-free, that it cannot slip its skin somehow, its origins, its embodiment, and float from Belize to Belgium or Moorhead to Moscow.

A Celtic theologian, John O'Donohue, writes:

Spirituality is the art of transfiguration. We should not force ourselves to change by hammering our lives into any predetermined shape. We do not need to operate according to the idea of a predetermined program or plan for our lives. Rather we need to practice a new art of attention to the inner rhythm of our days and lives. This attention brings a new awareness of our own human and divine presence....It is far more creative to work with the idea of mindfulness rather than with the idea of will. Too often people try to change their lives by using the will as a kind of hammer to beat their life into proper shape. The intellect identifies the goal of the program and the will accordingly forces the life into that shape. This way of approaching the sacredness of one's own presence is externalist and violent....If you work with a different rhythm, you will come easily and naturally home to yourself. Your soul knows the geography of your destiny....A renewal, indeed a complete transfiguration of your life, can come through attention to your senses.<sup>11</sup>

The commitment to begin physically, but not one-dimensionally, and to quote this poetic Celtic theologian represents a hard turn for me. The most difficult thing is the bedrock assertion that we Christians must give up the oh-so-modern-and-American notion that we can in fact control our lives and accomplish grand designs. We have to stop living toward a predetermined accomplishment—like the reestablishment of mainline Protestantism or the bureaucratic strategy to control the panoply of factors in order to produce a 6.7% market share, a more aerodynamic car, or church growth of such-and-such a magnitude.

<sup>11</sup>John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997) 57-58.



Furthermore, the future of a theology for the rural church and of a vision for the rural church lies in the acceptance of the bodily and physical, the land-ed and the limited, and in an acceptance and celebration of our own inner rhythms and God-mindfulness. This theological perspective begins with creation, suggesting that God is very much involved in an ongoing way with the creation, that the Spirit that breathed life into the void breathes life into us, and that the incarnate God, Jesus our brother, redeemed us through the grace of God.

When we turn to the doctrine of redemption with this perspective, we see the material universe not simply as a stage on which humans play out their relationship with God, nor merely as a launching pad for a more spiritual existence. Instead, the material universe has been and will be transformed in the power of the risen Christ. “The resurrection promise embraces not just human beings but the whole creation. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is the promise and the beginning of the reconciliation of all things, whether on earth or in heaven through the blood of the cross (Col 1:20).”<sup>12</sup>

Denis Edwards retrieves the theology of Bonaventure to emphasize the Holy Spirit’s work of bringing the whole universe into consummation in God. Under “the influence of the *exitus-reditus* schema,” Bonaventure “saw created things as coming to their consummation in God....God will be revealed as dwelling in the midst of creation, bringing healing and liberation to all creatures (Is. 11:6-9; 65:17-25; 2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 8:18-25; Col. 1:15-20; Rv. 21).”<sup>13</sup>

The whole of creation matters to God and will share in the transforming power of Jesus. Karl Rahner insists that Christians who believe in the resurrection should be the most “sublime of materialists,” since “we cannot think of any ultimate fulfillment of the human spirit without thinking at the same time of matter enduring and reaching its perfection.”<sup>14</sup>

Wes Jackson, at one point, talks about the difference between a *provincial* attitude, which is always “looking towards empire,” toward mobility, toward success “just over the next hill,” and a *parochial* attitude, which says, “Here is my place, this is good enough.” Jackson would have us adopt a parochial attitude and become native to this place. The economy of abundance would endorse that idea up to a point, but both the Antiochene and Alexandrian traditions would rather talk about the providential and fertile goodness of this place, which is not just “good enough” but the place where God is active.

Let me now do two things: first, lay out some theological emphases for rural churches to address and, then, turn to some practical implications for congregations.

<sup>12</sup>Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 86-87; cf. also Eph 1:10; Rev 21:1.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>14</sup>See Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the ‘New Man,’” in *Theological Investigations*, 23 vols. (various publishers, 1961-1992) 5:147; “The Resurrection of the Body,” *Theological Investigations* 2:212-213; “The Festival of the Future of the World,” *Theological Investigations* 7:183; quoted in Edwards, *Jesus*, 109.

## V. THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES

1. In distinction from the religion of the culture—even the rural culture—we are not in charge; we cannot control the world; we cannot fix it all. The religion of science would have us believe that we can do that.<sup>15</sup> We are not saved by performance, but by grace. And grace is communicated relationally, which has traditionally been the rural culture’s long suit—and which we need to nurture and prune and baby into blossom. Salvation is a gift from the Other whose warmth and compassion we are to respond to in gifting others. Thus our theology builds on the base of salvific relationship: God’s reign. It is a theology of hope and expectation, a theology of life.

Christianity is not finally about making things happen but about loving God and neighbor. We are about community, about partnerships, about alliances. We cannot control the world, and we don’t need to.

2. Our theology is a theology of accompaniment. We accompany each other, we accompany the marginal and the about-to-be-foreclosed-upon and the displaced because we are faithful to God and the vision of the kingdom beyond rational calculation. We are on the way, on the journey, in exile, but also at home. The goal is not to get there, God will take care of that; it is to live in a way that worships God and loves neighbor.

3. Undergirding both the community of God and the theology of accompaniment is the presence of God, the sense of God as dynamic and active in the world. Rural people, particularly, have a visceral sense of this presence. “God is the center who holds despite the winds of change and the chaos of contemporary life.”<sup>16</sup> God goes with us and is active throughout life.

4. This God is also active throughout creation, loving creation. What was God doing on the cross? Loving us, all of us, all of the worming, squirming, bleating, and breathing life in this cosmos. We in the rural church appreciate the physical and the bodily. We still have some sense of place, which enables us to appreciate and notice our land and the Creator of the land. We take the physical seriously. We are part of the physical, and God is moving through us as part of nature. We know we are connected.

5. This last point takes a blind leap. God’s power flows into us when we are open to the inpouring of the Spirit. We stand in God’s power; we are filled with the incarnation and redeemed in power. The church especially is redeemed in power. Are we capable of giving up control? In Nelson Mandela’s inaugural address he states that we are not afraid of being powerless, we can do that; instead, what scares us is that we are powerful, we are God’s creatures, and we have been made beautiful. We have been gifted.

<sup>15</sup>Ellen T. Charry, “Reviving Theology in a Time of Change,” and Dorothee Soelle, “Kneeling and Walking Upright,” in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

<sup>16</sup>L. Shannon Jung et al., *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 133.

## VI. WHAT SHOULD THE RURAL CHURCH DO?

1. Worship powerfully. Worship is not a performance, but an enactment, a pretending of what it would mean to live the kingdom.<sup>17</sup> Worship is a response to a gift, a group response in which many participate. Worship needs to reflect what it means to respond to God. Thus it calls for massive creativity on the part of many people in the church.

2. Practice reconciliation. Rural society is fragmented into many groups. There is often little sense of community or of forgiveness among peoples. The rural church has the advantage of being the hope of many communities that has the authority to call people to the cross. At the cross we see the self-giving nature of God and can offer forgiveness as we have been forgiven. Building community begins with our forgiving others and begging for their forgiveness.

3. Pay attention to what is happening physically. Where are people hurting? Where is there joy and laughter and celebration? The body frequently tells us what is needed. The faithful are called to pay attention to ambiguity, conflict, and death; the body communicates those needs.

Less dramatically, does the church welcome “snow birds” back when they return from Arizona in the spring? Is it alert to such bodily needs as the need to be welcomed? In addition, is it aware of what its youth are experiencing physically? Hospitality is a practice that includes alertness to what is taking place bodily.

4. Love God. A final word comes from the familiar story of Mary and Martha with Jesus (Luke 10:38-42). Here Martha is hustling around and taking care of business, and she says to Jesus, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister is not helping—that she has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me. After all, you just got finished telling us about the good Samaritan and how important it was to help.”

Many church people have been Marthas for the Lord—we have served the church, we have worked for the institution, we have been parents to the children who come without parents.

And that’s the point—it is *we* who have done this. We run the church on our backs. We carry the church. Martha does the work of the Lord, but it is not enough. Jesus says to her, “Martha, Martha, Martha, do not be anxious. You are worried about many things. Mary has chosen the better portion that won’t be taken away from her. But really only one thing is needful: come and love me. It will be enough. Give what you have, and it will be enough.”

What happens to our perceptions of capitalism, of love of neighbor, of service when we preach Christ first, when we put God first? We discover that we have needs that we cannot meet. We discover that we cannot control. Only God can meet those needs, only God will control. Salvation only comes together with God, in the presence of others. Only one thing is needful: Love God. ☩

<sup>17</sup>See Craig Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), esp. Chapter 4, “Worship: Pretending the Kingdom.”