



Land Values and Ministry

“The land” is both the physical wrapping around our globe, except where “the sea” has not given it space, and a concept of which dreams are made. It was the hope of Israel to possess the land promised to Abraham. It was the goal of millions of immigrants to America to go “unto a good land” (to borrow the title of one of Wilhelm Moberg’s books), settle it, and thrive. Loss of the land by Native Americans has meant the loss of a significant basis for aspects of their culture.

Today we are confronted by land issues to an unprecedented degree. That is a bold and sweeping statement, but it is apt. Never have so many issues, so many urgent issues, and so many complex issues regarding the land faced us all at once in North America. That is so for the population as a whole and for the church. These issues have to do with survival, economics, conservation, politics, the fabric and future of rural society, theology, and ministry.

There was a time in America when “the land” would not have been thought to be a topic worthy of theological consideration. We are not in the habit of thinking of ourselves as a “chthonic” nation, that is, a people whose national culture is bound to a particular focal spot on earth, a land with which we identify, as in the phrase “blood and soil.” We are different from the ancient Egyptians, for example, of whose culture one can hardly think apart from images of the Nile River. We are a nation of immigrants and their descendants; we are mobile; and we have made looking west a synonym for expecting ever increasing opportunities and expansion. And therefore it should come as no surprise that the so-called “biblical theology” movement would prosper particularly in America, which celebrated the mighty acts of God in history. The themes of exodus, wandering, covenant, and promise were evaluated positively. But the era of Israel’s settlement on the land, her identification with the “land of Israel” as a part of her national self-understanding, and the flowering of wisdom and a theology of creation were less easily appropriated.

This does not mean, however, that “the land” has not been considered a matter of importance in the churches. The use of the land has been a vital topic under the general category of stewardship, and the churches have had a lot to say in that regard, especially in terms of soil conservation and to some extent the treatment of farm laborers. But there is much more at stake in the present era. Even a cursory reading of the press shows that it is precisely those who are most able to render a proper stewardship of the land—those who live on the land and

care for it, investing themselves in farming—that are being threatened. That means that our speaking of the stewardship of the land must be directed now not simply to the farmer, but also to those who shape farm policies and policies concerning food production and its distribution in the political and economic sectors.

As in rural economics, so in the wider culture one can say that “land values have fallen.”

We are no longer a predominantly agrarian society. Our psychological distance from the land has become so great that the land has been taken for granted; it is simply there as the flooring upon which to build the superstructure of our culture. Or so we thought. But we have been reminded in recent months that that is simply not so. Farm bankruptcies at home, starvation abroad, and the new awareness that agricultural land is being diverted to other purposes have alerted us to the stark reality that the land is one of our greatest national resources. It is appropriate and necessary to ask what our scriptural and theological traditions have to say in regard to the land, and to spell out their implications in the present context. And, in the meantime, there is ministry to do both among those who are suffering loss and in the larger political, economic, and social realms.

In this issue of the journal *Darold Beekmann* informs us about the condition of those who live in rural communities, and he offers perceptive advice on ministry among them. *Dennis Olson* surveys perspectives on the land in the Bible, centering his discussion on the patriarchal narratives concerning the promise and gift of the land, and also its preservation in Israel, and then he reflects on how all of this might apply to contemporary land issues. *James Sorenson* contends that our feelings about, and actions toward, the land are actually based more on images we have than on formal theological reflection. He describes four main images and projects their consequences concerning land usage. *Anne Kanten* addresses the current erosion of land and of culture on the land, fills us in on the consequences of current U.S. farm policies, and indicates directions which should be taken. *C. Dean Freudenberger* declares that U.S. farm policies are bankrupt, makes some prescriptions for future policies, and reflects on new attitudes toward the land which are required, drawing from Scripture and the theology of creation. *David Ostendorf* discusses, in very practical ways, how the churches can respond to the current rural crisis—in terms of both pastoral care of its victims and political action to alleviate it. Finally, *George Tinker* gives us insights into the perceptions of Native Americans concerning the land, showing how the relationship of people and the land, the cycles of nature, and the concept of spatiality constitute ingredients of their perspective.

The Resources section contains three essays. The first, by *Roy Herron*, provides an overview of biblical laws concerning the land and the care of the poor, ending with reflections on this material for the present. The second, by *Thomas Mundahl*, draws upon literature and the insights of Erik Erikson to disclose attitudes of persons in later life who move toward a life of integrity, in which the dust of the earth loses its threat and comes to symbolize new life and hope. Finally, the Texts in Context essay, written by *Dennis Ormseth*, engages texts which appear as the second lessons in the lectionary for the weeks to come.

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