



## The Erosion of Soil and Culture

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Our land, this earth, is the supreme gift from God, the placenta upon which all life is dependent. With this gift of land comes responsibility, first to our fellow inhabitants of the land, and then to future generations. History has shown that if the bounty of this gift is widely shared among God's people, there will be peace. And if it is well cared for, there will be abundance for our children. But if it is taken from the many by the few, injustice will reign. The land will no longer be cared for, thus denying our children a bountiful future.

The impoverishment of the land and of the people who work the land has been a recurring theme throughout human history. In Rome the impoverishment of the rural culture and the soil was a key factor in the decline of the Roman Empire. In the book entitled *Grain through the Ages*, the situation of farmers in the Roman Empire is described in terms disturbingly similar to our farm crisis in the United States today.

One reason for the decline of grain farming in Italy was the importation of grain into Rome from the rich grain lands of Sicily and Egypt. In Sicily, these grain lands had been appropriated by rich men and scheming politicians who farmed them with slave labor. As a result, the markets of Rome were flooded with cheap grain. Grain became so cheap that farmers who still owned small pieces of land could not get enough money for the grain they raised to support their families and pay their taxes. They were forced to turn their farms over to the rich landowners.

Roman citizens who had become very rich bought up the little farms and joined them together into great estates. Very often a rich man would lend a farmer money and, when the latter was unable to pay back the loan, the rich man took the farm.

The farmers, after their land had been lost, went within the city walls leaving the scythe and the plow. They worked now and then at a small wage. They ate mostly bread made of wheat which was distributed to them by any politician who wanted their vote.

The use of slaves meant that the land was badly worked because usually the slaves did as little as they possibly could unless they were under the eye of the overseer. The land itself became very poor.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Grace T. Hallock and Thomas D. Wood, *Grain through the Ages* (Chicago: Quaker Oats School Health Service, 1927) 35-37.

This description of the “farm crisis” in ancient Rome contains the exact same elements we see today. First, the economic pressures of low farm prices were used to displace independent farmers from their land. Second, these farms were then consolidated into “great estates” forming a “landed aristocracy.” Third, displaced farmers were forced to “move to the city” where they often remained unemployed and hungry, forced to be dependent on welfare. Finally, the land itself became poor as production for cheap exports necessitated farming practices inconsistent with sound soil conservation. The Bible explores this theme in numerous instances, especially in the Old Testament. God’s will is clear; there must be justice among the people on the land and careful stewardship of the land.

## I. JUSTICE AMONG THE PEOPLE

Walter Brueggemann, in his classic article “On Land-losing and Land-receiving,” looks at God’s expectations of how we treat each other as inhabitants of the same land. “The land may be freely given (Deut. 8:7-10). But it is not freely kept. It is kept only as Israel transforms the land into an area of justice, righteousness, mercy and fidelity.”<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann is blunt about the fate of people who fail to heed this term of God’s gift. “Unjust people will lose land. There are not enough policies or strategies to resist God’s unsettling will for justice. The loss of land is neither mechanical nor is it mysterious. It happens in terms of political processes and realities. So it may be an invading army (Hos 7:9), or it may be a usurping, confiscating economic arrangement.”<sup>3</sup> Theologian John Hart takes this theme even further, “Where land is seen as matter, the primary attitude towards it is that it is to be exploited to serve the needs and wants of the exploiters, whether an individual or a nation. The property relationship then established is that land is an owned object. It exists solely to benefit the one who has civil title to it.”

The prophet Amos wrote about 755 B.C., during the time that Israel and Judah were experiencing prosperity and power. Major changes had occurred in the society’s forms of production and commerce. The former rural society had shifted to emphasize exports and trade as it controlled most of the trade routes. This implied a greater emphasis on money in the economy, and on debt. That would lead to concentration of land ownership, greater imbalance between rich and poor people, and the consolidation of power in the hands of the few. One result was corruption in the market-place. In the following passage, Amos describes the injustice of those viewing the land strictly as a means for selfish ends.

Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, saying,  
 “When will the new moon be over,  
 So that we may buy grain  
 And the Sabbath, that we may open the wheat market.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Brueggemann, “On Land-losing and Land-receiving,” *dialog* 19 (1980) 170.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

To make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger  
And to cheat with dishonest scales.  
So as to buy the helpless for money  
And that we may sell the refuse of the wheat?"  
The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:  
"Indeed, I will never forget any of their deeds." (8:4-7)

Justice among the people of the land must exist alongside a caring for the land itself.

## II. JUSTICE FOR THE LAND

In perhaps the most important survey of worldwide land stewardship practices, W. C. Lowdermilk travelled to the Middle East. Lowdermilk, shocked by the conditions he found, proposed an Eleventh Commandment. "Thou shalt inherit the Holy Earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation. Thou shalt safeguard thy fields from soil erosion, thy living waters from drying up, thy forests from desolation, and protect thy hills from overgrazing by thy herds, that thy descendants may have abundance forever. If any shall fail in this stewardship of the land, thy fruitful fields shall become sterile stony ground and wasting gullies, and thy descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or perish from off the face of the earth."<sup>4</sup>

## III. THE CRISIS OF THE LAND TODAY

Failure to fill the land with justice or to preserve the land for the future will bring poverty and the eventual loss of the land. Today both the land and rural culture are in deep crisis. A recent USDA report shows that in the next twenty years the U.S. will lose over a third of our last remaining topsoil. Over two-thirds of our nation's farmland is losing topsoil at a rate faster than nature can replenish it. Interwoven with this horrible erosion of the soil is the economic crisis facing the people of the land.

Secretary of Agriculture John Block has estimated that 200,000 farm families will lose their farms this year. Taking into account all of the jobs, businesses, schools, and churches dependent on these farms for their economic support, up to 500,000 people will lose their current source of income as a direct result. Unless current policies are changed, over 50% of our family farms will disappear by 1990; 90% will be gone by the year 2000.

## IV. WHAT CAN BE DONE

Today our church is deeply involved in trying to understand and help solve this crisis. As in Roman times, the root causes remain the economic pressure of low prices. Prices paid to U.S. farmers have been set by the U.S. Congress at levels below the cost-of-production for most family farms. Agriculture is now only

<sup>4</sup>W. C. Lowdermilk, *The Conquest of the Land through Seven Thousand Years* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953) 30.

profitable for corporations or wealthy individuals engaged in “tax-loss farming.” Family farmers have gone deeply into debt to cover these losses. Many are faced with going hopelessly further into debt, or quitting. Former President Nixon’s Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz’s command to U.S. farmers was “Get big or get out.” “Getting big” often meant acquiring huge, heavy machinery which deeply compacted the soil. It often meant using more powerful chemicals to replace the people being forced off their farms. Getting big often meant getting every possible bushel out of the soil planting fence row to fence row, plowing up and down hillsides, draining swamps, and plowing fragile, virgin prairie. As in Rome, the economic crisis is making the land poor.

We are now witnessing the forced liquidation of up to one-half of our family farms. The massive debt accumulated by farmers, just like the erosion of our topsoil, cannot be sustained. With interest rates at record levels, the debt cannot be repaid. This erosion of rural culture is accelerating at previously unknown speed. It must be stopped. And it can be stopped. The political decision which has made farming profitable only for “tax-loss farmers” must be changed. Farming methods which erode the soil, or contaminate the water must be changed. The displacement of rural people from their land can be reversed. All of this, however, will require enormous leadership from our church. To change the government policies and leadership and to alter moral, ethical and social attitudes of our people (both urban and rural) will require our church to play a key role. The church must also give leadership to the political effort to reverse the rapid centralization of the ownership and control over God’s gift, the land.

Farm policy legislation is being written in 1985 which will set the policy guidelines for U.S. agriculture from now until the end of the century. There will be intense debate between two seemingly opposite views. Some believe that we should lower the prices paid to farmers in an attempt to increase U.S. farm exports. The opposite view would help farmers receive a higher price for their crops, adequate to cover actual costs of production on an average-sized farm. Not only would this second approach prevent the bankruptcy of many U.S. farms; it is also crucial for aiding food self-sufficiency in the Third World.

At present, subsidized U.S. grain exports have a serious detrimental effect on local food production in Third World countries. Local farmers cannot compete in the marketplace against under-priced imports from the United States. They are forced off their land and, like the Roman farmers, pushed into the urban areas with very little hope for work. They become dependent on the whims of politicians for free food or food donations. Their abandoned lands either dry up and become part of the rapidly expanding desert, or perhaps they are consolidated into estates to produce cattle for export back to the United States. By choosing to price U.S. farm products at more reasonable levels, the United States would be taking a strong stand against practices which have ruined agriculture in many poor Third World countries. This is an excellent example of moral concern-hunger-that demands direct political action by church members. Our churches must encourage, not discourage, participation in our political process.

But we must act soon. Ours would not be the first “great nation” where the Lord’s will for “justice, righteousness, mercy and fidelity” was ignored.

Our children would not be the first to inherit deprivation and difficulty from their parents. We have the lessons of 7000 years, and the wisdom of God's Word to guide us. The question remains, Do we have the political will and spiritual strength? We need to heed the words of Amos, the prophet of courage, who "told it like it was" back in 755 B.C. The injustice, the issues, are still the same today, and his message remains valid even today. We need Amos today. In fact we need thousands like Amos with prophetic voices to challenge the deliberate public policies creating injustice in both rural and urban America. The land is being borrowed from our children. We must return it to them filled with justice—not destroyed by the erosion of soil and culture.