

Wholeness: Toward An Agrarian Pastoral Ministry

The twentieth century has been heralded as the greatest period of time to grace the presence of humanity since humans have had the means and forethought to keep a record of events. Technological advances, wealth accumulation, geo-political independence, unimaginable violence and global interconnectedness are a few of the many factors that have propelled this century to its greatness. The scale of the advances that this period has brought, and the impending economic explosion in its wake, have laid upon the hearts of all modern people that what has taken place over the past century has put us as a people in a far better position than we were prior to these monumental achievements. Indeed, the advances of the twentieth century have helped us gain a great deal in the way of health and wholeness. Yet, what has often been overlooked are the losses that have amounted in the face of relentless “development”. For if there were a phrase to describe the twentieth century, surely among its leading contenders would be “unrestrained advancement.”

The church in the twentieth century has largely followed suit with the dominant culture pertaining to its obsession with advancement, development and growth. Within the evangelical community spiritual health has been equated with the aforementioned trio of words. Theologies have been worked out that are hinged upon industrial definitions of growth and these definitions have done much to shape our understanding of spiritual

health. Churches have consolidated, real estate has been acquired, individuals have been amassed and spiritual leaders have been adorned with celebrity status, all of which is a perceived indication that God is at work within our midst.

Surely God has been at work throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Many people in every nation the world over have been introduced to a way of life that is found in Jesus Christ. Sacred scripture has been translated into hundreds of languages for the first time. Prominent Christians have spoken truth to the powers that be, continuing the prophetic tradition of the biblical writers. The sick have been cared for, the prisoners have been visited, the orphans have been taken in, the voiceless have been heard and the Word has given life in many of the dark places of our humanity.

Surely these things are great, and my goal here is not to question their greatness. What I wonder about though is the loss that is incurred when a people move in a certain direction, toward advancement and development, that causes them to choose new paths while forsaking some of the old ones. In a culture obsessed with innovation and advancement, it can be easy to forget the good that is still present in the old paths and ideas. What is lost, for instance, when eaters no longer want to purchase the lettuce that is grown on the family owned farm a few miles away because it costs a quarter more than what they can get at the supermarket? What is lost when, over time, that family farm cannot stay afloat because eaters ultimately value the single bottom line of short term economic value over the triple bottom line of long term economic, communal and environmental health? What is the cost of individuals and families forsaking the parish of their childhood for the mega-church community across town? What is the cost of a

pastor who no longer cares for one hundred families in her neighborhood but who oversees an organization that ultimately cares for over one thousand families throughout her community? What is lost when local churches are consolidated into regional churches? And what is lost when pastors trade in their role of spiritual shepherd for organizational leader and manager? Put differently, what is lost when pastoral work becomes industrialized?

Norman Wirzba defines industrialism as “the way of the machine, the way of technological invention that premises economic success on the exploitation of habitats and communities.”¹ Wendell Berry adds that “to the industrial mind, a machine is not merely an instrument for doing work or amusing ourselves or making war; it is an explanation of the world and of life.”² He continues:

Industrialism begins with technological invention. But agrarianism begins with givens: land, plants, animals, weather, hunger and the birthright knowledge of agriculture. Industrialists are always ready to ignore, sell, or destroy the past in order to gain the entirely unprecedented wealth, comfort, and happiness supposedly to be found in the future. Agrarian farmers know that their very identity depends on their willingness to receive gratefully, use responsibly and hand down intact an inheritance, both natural and cultural, from the past. Agrarians understand themselves as the users and caretakers of some things they did not make, and of some things that they cannot make.³

¹ Norman Wirzba, “Introduction,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 17.

² Wendell Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 24.

³ Wendell Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 26.

Wirzba simply adds, “agrarianism is a way of life attuned to requirements of land and local communities.⁴ This sounds remarkably similar to helpful pastoral work. For the pastor is one who is attuned to her parish, her community, and who knows what it is that they require in order to make room for the working of the Spirit among them. Yet much of pastoral work in over the past few decades has looked very different from this.

Since at least the middle of the twentieth century pastoral theology and care has been overly informed by the industrialization of western culture. In order to reclaim useful pastoral ministry it would be helpful for pastors to become apprentices of agrarian minded thinkers and farmers. Why agrarians? If my first assertion is correct then it follows that pastors need to learn a different way of pastoring from someone who has not been conditioned by industrial culture to look at things from its perspective. Agrarian minded women and men are voices crying out in the mostly rural parts of our culture, speaking truth to the powers that be, those who run our culture from an industrial stance. Most of these folks are farmers who moonlight as writers and speakers. Some teach at seminaries, others raise grass and good soil. What they have in common is their ability to wade through the empty promises of industrial culture, those of progress, advancement and development, pick up a few good tricks along the way, yet mostly stick to their traditional ways of living, relating, and taking care of the earth.

It is true that much of agrarianism has to do with agriculture. Writers like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson have been warning of the dangers of industrial scale food production for many decades now. Yet their criticism of agribusiness is not simply

⁴ Norman Wirzba, “Introduction,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 17.

about the food that ends up on our plates. The industrialization of our food system has far reaching implications that affect how we view our bodies, how we work with each other, how we make a living and how we raise our children. For agrarian thinkers these implications are the crux of their prophetic stance. A monoculture of broccoli that measures a square mile is not so troubling on the surface. It is the means whereby an agribusiness came to plant broccoli in this manner that is so troubling. For no one did this prior to World War II, and the decisions that were made to grow a field of broccoli in such a manner impact the growers, pickers and eaters of this broccoli. In order to maintain a façade that resembles health in a field of broccoli that large, one must use toxic chemicals to keep pests and disease at bay. These chemicals do not simply disappear upon human contact with the broccoli. These chemicals pollute the soil, run off into streams, make the pickers sick, stay on the broccoli when eaten and generally contribute to the demise of our health. The only reason one plants broccoli in this way and therefore has a need to use toxic chemicals is for purposes of profit and volume, which have come to define the industrial way of life. If one seeks the growth of profit and volume one cannot simultaneously seek the growth of health, for one cannot serve two masters. This is the position from which agrarian thinkers are working. It is from this position that evangelical pastors could learn much about pastoral ministry.

While pastoral ministry in our present context is widely defined depending on tradition and theological position, the dominant evangelical construction of pastoral ministry over the past number of decades has largely taken its cues from capitalistic corporate culture. The effects on the pastor's role within the Body of Christ have been

dramatic. Pastors now find themselves acting as organizational administrators first, with more mystical or spiritual expressions of ministry, such as prayer, listening and sitting with parishioners, relegated to the margins of their weekly schedule, or delegated to various specialists either within or without the ministry of the church. My purpose here is not to diminish the importance of fine administrative work within the role of pastoral ministry. Pastors are not meant to function as pure ascetics, separated from the daily world of the rest of us. However, faithful pastoral work should seamlessly connect the ordinary cycles of life with the extraordinary cycles of the spiritual realm. Peterson says it well when he contrasts what he calls the “cure of souls”, that is, pastoral ministry centered on the spiritual health of the parish, with the task of running a church. He writes,

I am not contemptuous of running a church, nor do I dismiss its importance. I run a church myself; I have for over twenty years. I try to do it well. But I do it in the same spirit that I, along with my wife, run our house. There are many essential things we routinely do, often (but not always) with joy. But running a house is not what we do. What we do is build a home, develop in marriage, raise children, practice hospitality, pursue lives of work and play. It is reducing pastoral work to institutional duties that I object to, not the duties themselves, which I gladly share with others in the church.⁵

Here, Peterson makes two helpful distinctions that I want to explore further. The first is the reduction of pastoral work to institutional duties has taken place over the past few decades. In the 1994 Frank Darabont film, *Shawshank Redemption*, Morgan Freeman plays Ellis Boyd “Red” Redding, a convicted murderer serving a life sentence at Shawshank prison. Repeatedly denied parole during his forty-year tenure at Shawshank,

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989)*, 59.

Red comes to believe that, if ever granted a life outside of the fortified walls of Shawshank, he would not be able to function as an active member of society. After spending the majority of his life behind bars, always taking orders from someone else for his every move, Red admits to himself that he has become institutionalized. He has come to depend upon the identity and meaning that has come to him as a prisoner of the state. This identity provides meaning and therefore stability for him. At least inside Shawshank he has purpose and status among his fellow convicts. Losing all hope of having a normal life once paroled, Red contemplates if living as a “free” man is a life worth living at all. The institutionalization of his heart and soul is thorough. His loss of hope is stunning, and certainly tragic. His inability to imagine a life and identity that is different from his convict status is what defines his institutionalization.

Pastors are no different. To function within any organization one must come to learn the norms, language, taboos and other social cues that creates meaning and helps the organization function or else risk losing affiliation with the organization. Pastors who have been institutionalized into believing that pastoral ministry is no more than running a church have lost all sense of the spiritual, that is, the working of the Spirit within the ordinary movements of life, which is essential to robust and faithful pastoral ministry. When one is unable to imagine pastoral work outside of this framework, it is a pretty good indicator that all significant sense of hope has been lost.

The difference between Red in Shawshank and many evangelical pastors is that Red recognizes his institutionalization and most pastors do not. Therefore Red can recognize his prison life as something that is less than desirable, albeit outside of his

ability to change, while the pastor might not only desire his ministerial practice, but also embrace it as being directed by God. The immediate effect of Red's behavior is largely confined to his own personal well being. The pastor's behavior however is projected upon the community and those with whom she is with. Given the nature of pastoral ministry throughout the later half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, one needs only to look at the assimilation of evangelical life and practice within the dominant cultural ideals to see the adverse effects of an industrial pastoral ministry.

For the industrial pastor, everything is reduced to numbers. Spiritual growth is quantified into conversions, church attendance and the number of small groups on the roster. What is stunning about such quantifiable growth indicators is their assumption that if people are present when the Gospel story is told then spiritual movement must be taking place. And maybe it is, just not as often as we think it is. For every evangelical pastor knows the triumph of victory when a conversion takes place or when attendance is continually up on a Sunday morning. Egos are boosted, raises are in order and everyone has a lighter step. Yet, just like within industrial capitalism, this sort of endless growth must be sustained, for recession, spiritual and economic alike, is always knocking on one's door. This thinking leads pastors to organize their churches in such a way where the most important thing that happens all week is the number of people in the pews and the number of dollars in the plate. When this happens, as it often does, ministries of pastoral care, listening, prayer and living life with the community all fall by the wayside. So it goes that pastoral validation has become quantifiable.

The second point worth highlighting from Peterson comes at the end of his thought. The business of “running a church” is not simply meant for the pastor to administer, but it is meant for those within the community to share. Industrialism has conditioned its adherents to value efficiency and effectiveness over faithfulness. Within an industrial framework effectiveness and faithfulness have become synonymous. Yet if the question of effectiveness is our “bottom line” then it often entirely leaves out the questions that faithfulness asks of us. Namely, “to what are we called and to whom are we accountable?”⁶ Something that is effective might not lead the community to a greater state of health. For instance, it is more effective, economically speaking, for a farmer to spray pesticide on a field of broccoli rather than pay a team of workers to carefully and painstakingly weed and kills bugs and on a regular basis. Even though this industrial method of agriculture is effective in the short term, meaning that the farmer does not have to worry too much in the short term about his broccoli succumbing to pests, it does not take into account the impact these chemicals have on his watershed, his customers who eat his broccoli and his own personal health, not even to mentioned his profit margin. For the single greatest problem that industrialism has blinded us to is that of the short-term fix. As long as something works in the short term then we need not think five, ten or fifty years down the road. Yet anyone who has been alive for more than a few decades knows that the decisions of one generation always will effect the following generations way of life. A farmer then must ask the question of faithfulness: “to what am I called and

⁶ Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 32.

to whom am I accountable?” In order to begin the process of answering these questions well, one must be able to think beyond the end of the current growing season.

So too it is with pastors. Evangelicalism has experienced tremendous amounts of numerical and influential growth over the past few decades. Yet the form of Christianity that it has had to embrace in order to maintain this industrial form of success is far removed from faithful discipleship within our current cultural context in this country. For discipleship always asks the question of faithfulness. Yet industrial forms of pastoral ministry, those defined by effective and efficient management of faith communities and conversion rates, often fail to ask these questions. Rather, what they are often concerned with is an insatiable desire to “produce” more disciples and “consume” more spiritual products, to the great delight of evangelical publishing houses that are laughing all the way to the bank. My point is not that evangelical pastors are deliberately misleading anyone into industrial forms of faith. Rather, they are blind to the influences of industrial ways of life that have informed their theology of growth and effectiveness to the detriment of faithfulness.

Pastors who have been conditioned by industrial forms of thought will undoubtedly push back against this critique of their ministerial work. My goal here is not simply to criticize the person that does the work, for surely there is much value in the relationships that have been formed and sustained as a result of this work. Rather, my goal is to point out the “blind spots” in evangelical pastoral ministry. The end does not justify the means. The good intentions of evangelicalism, the preaching of the Gospel, the invitation into a way of life found in Jesus Christ, are things that I wholeheartedly

applaud. It is the communication and ongoing administration of these forms that make me nervous. For if the life that Christ came to give us is forgiveness in theory only, if it only makes one a better person internally, if it only calls us to side with one political ideology, if it only teaches us to seek answers and not questions, if it only calls us to love our neighbor in spirit, then it is not really good news.

For many pastors, especially men, the Gospel becomes the vehicle by which they are validated. The effectiveness of a pastor to get people through the door, to get them to raise their hands to the salvation invitation, this is where one can easily find one's worth. In this way, the Gospel becomes the guise for the pastor to attain recognition and praise. The pastor can easily use the Gospel to validate himself in the eyes of his colleagues and parishioners. I have every confidence in God's ability to use even the most insincere of motives to work in the hearts and minds of human beings. Yet something is inevitably lost when the Gospel is reduced to an ego booster. It is easy to work a crowd up into a frenzy every week and call that the Spirit moving. It is much harder to believe in the Gospel seventy-two hours after the frenzy has passed and one's life is falling apart. Lee Camp goes as far as saying that "Christianity has become a vaccination, inoculating us, protecting us from discipleship."⁷ This is especially true for the highly politicized expression of the Christian faith that is prevalent in the current American social context. In making a distinction between discipleship and religion, Camp speculates that "religion provides a set of abstract ends or goals for which we must strive; then we seek the means that will get us there."⁸

⁷ Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33

If religion is the industrialization and thereby the sterilization of Christianity then agrarian thinking intersecting with the Christian faith is a helpful way out of this particular expression of religious formation. For agrarian thinking emphasizes the wholeness and the interconnectedness that is present between every moving part. Agrarian thinking asks questions of faithfulness, because it's proponents are not primarily concerned with volume and price, like those caught in the web of the industrial economy. Rather, agrarian proponents are asking questions of communal health and wholeness. What is good for me must also be good for you. If it is not good for you then it is also not good for me. We are connected; our health, our value and our success are connected. If I am to do what is best for me then it must also be best for you. This is how agrarians think. And they do not limit their practice to theory. They make a way of life out of it. They set up networks of growers and buyers, limiting the distance between the maker of food, goods and other products and the purchaser of these items. They opt out, to the best of their ability, of the current industrial way of living and consuming that is disconnected, unrestrained and out of control. They learn to say, "this much, but no more."⁹

I am often left to wonder what our churches and pastors can learn from these people. Restraint, wholeness, health, interconnectedness. These are not new ideas, but the ways in which they are being conceived of and practiced certainly are. How can parishioners come to see themselves as active co-producers within the body of Christ, the church, rather than passive consumers of religious goods and spiritual programs? How can pastors come to see their role as one who cares well for and helps build a church

⁹ Wendell Berry, "The Agrarian Standard," in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 26.

community, rather than one who “runs” a church? How can we come to intuitively live within our connectedness to one another? We must start small. Nothing changes overnight. And then we must work together everyday to create the world that we desire so deep within our bones to come to fruition.

If the Gospel is no more than a point of validation for my way of living and thinking then I have no use for it. I already agree with myself. Yet if the Gospel is a constant prophetic voice, speaking truth in the face of my darkness, then I have use for it. If the Gospel often makes me uncomfortable then I’m compelled to discover more of it. The heart of agrarianism has Gospel implications. Wholeness, health, life, redemption. These are all traits of agrarian thought and work. It is evident that the Gospel has informed much of agrarian thought. And for this reason evangelical pastors would do well to give their ears, and their vocational direction, over to our agrarian sisters and brothers.

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