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**WHOLENESS: TOWARD AN AGRARIAN PASTORAL HERMENEUTIC**

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To Wendy - faithful and strong love, thank you for sustaining me

To Josiah - you bring me unspeakable joy

## **Abstract**

Much of Evangelical pastoral theology and practice has been overly influenced by an industrial hermeneutic or narrative. Industrial thought has dominated western culture since the middle of the twentieth century. It has made its way into our theology and our very understanding of the Gospel. Pastoral ministry has not gone unchanged by this phenomena. Industrialism is pervasive among pastors in their work and posture with those who make up the congregations that they serve. Industrialism places an inordinate amount of importance upon the end product of a cycle to the detriment of the sustainability of that cycle. For instance, industrial pastoral thinking has led many evangelical churches to place the utmost importance upon the “conversion experience” to the detriment of the process of conversion and continued trajectory of faithful discipleship after the conversion. It is for this reason that evangelical pastor theology has much to learn from agrarian minded thinkers. Agrarians are folks who place the health of the product cycle at the center of the health of the whole being. Their work is primarily centered in agriculture and ecology yet it has much further reaching implications than the farm or habitat. Agrarians place an emphasis on four major themes: faithfulness, identity & imagination, subversion and husbandry. Evangelical pastors would do well to learn how to reengage pastoral ministry through the eyes of the agrarians using the hermeneutic of these four themes. The work of the pastor is to be grounded in faithfulness, as opposed to success. The work of the pastor is to create new imagination around Christian identity, as opposed to maintaining cultural identity. The work of the pastor is to be subversive in introducing her parishioners to the Kingdom of God, as opposed to going along with the dominant cultural narrative. And the work of the pastor

is to husband, to care for, and to have a holistic understanding of the place where she is situated, as opposed to constructing a community narrative by listening to far off voices from other people groups. Pastors in the evangelical movement are looking for a different way of pastoring would do well to submit to the teaching of the agrarians.

## Introduction

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 humanity gain a great deal in the way of health and wholeness. Yet, what is often 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 Evangelical Movement in the twentieth century has largely followed suit with the dominant culture cultivating an obsession with advancement, development and growth.<sup>3</sup> Within the Evangelical Movement 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

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Moore and Julian L. Simon. "The Greatest Century That Ever Was: 25 Miraculous Trends of the Past 100 Years." December 15, 1999. [http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=1223](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=1223) (accessed March 29, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Greatness in this sense implies scale, not necessarily value.

<sup>3</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 50.

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.

The fact is that 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 brought life to many of the dark places of our humanity.

These achievements are great, and my goal here is not to question their greatness. What I do want to question is their value. What I wonder about 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 forgotten 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?<sup>4</sup> 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?

### **Thesis: A Response to Industrial Pastoral Ministry**

To answer this question I will look to a branch of theological reflection and action that I'm calling Agrarian Theology.<sup>5</sup> I assert that pastors in our contemporary North American context can practice a more holistic form of pastoral ministry by engaging in theological reflection, practice and integration with agrarian minded farmers and thinkers. My aim is to explain what exactly agrarian theology is, apply it to pastoral ministry and show what pieces of this way of thinking and living are compatible with the call of a pastor within an Evangelical, North American context.

Running through agrarian theology are four dominant themes that have practical implications for how one postures herself as a pastor within a faith community. Those themes are: (1) faithfulness, (2) identity & imagination, (3) subversion and (4) husbandry. I will first provide a deeper exploration of the pervasiveness of industrial thought that is

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the Triple Bottom Line see John Elkington, *Canibals with Forks* (Stony Creek: New Society Publishers, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> While I do not claim to have coined the term Agrarian Theology, I have not been able to find it in any published material.

embedded within pastoral ministry and give a basic overview of what agrarian practice looks like when it is positioned against industrialism. Then, I will devote rest of this essay to exploring an agrarian pastoral ministry and the themes that are woven within this posture.

## **Industrialism & Agrarianism**

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.”<sup>6</sup> Wendell Berry adds, “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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

Wirzba simply adds, “agrarianism is a way of life attuned to requirements of land and local communities.”<sup>9</sup> This sounds remarkably similar to faithful pastoral work. For the pastor is one who is attuned to her parish, her community, and who knows what it is that

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<sup>6</sup> Norman Wirzba, “Introduction,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Norman Wirzba, “Introduction,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 17.

they require in order to make room for the working of the Spirit among them. Yet much of pastoral work 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 influenced by the industrialization of western culture.<sup>10</sup> As Berry implies, this is a culture whose primary concern is limitless economic growth and development, often at the expense of the ordinary or commonplace pieces of life that have been taken for granted.<sup>11</sup> That is, the health of the land, the individual, the family, the larger community, etc.

Evangelical pastoral theology has largely been preoccupied with numerical growth and spiritual advancement as an indicator of spiritual health and vitality. For example, the correlation to spiritual growth or maturity is numerical and economic growth within the walls of a church. If more people are sitting in the pews on a Sunday morning, if more people are giving of their money and their time, then one can deduce that the Holy Spirit is at work. Surely the Holy Spirit *is* at work when these things happen. Yet there is a lost art of pastoral ministry and theology that has been gaining momentum over the last several decades that is often ignored by the best industrial minds within the Church. I call this lost art an agrarian pastoral hermeneutic.

In order to reclaim holistic pastoral ministry it would be helpful for pastors to become apprentices of agrarian minded thinkers and farmers. Why agrarians? If pastoral ministry has been overly influenced by industrialism, then it follows that pastors could learn a different way of pastoring from those who have not been conditioned by industrial

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<sup>10</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 95-96.

<sup>11</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Agrarian Standard," in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 24.

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.

While much of agrarianism has to do with agriculture, I propose that pastors have much to learn about the art of pastoral ministry from folks within the agrarian world. Writers like Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, Vandana Shiva and Barbara Kingsolver have been warning of the dangers of industrial scale food production for many decades now.<sup>12</sup> Yet their criticism of agribusiness is not simply 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. Industrialism is a way of life that has permeated our deepest convictions and most sacred traditions. For agrarian thinkers, the implications of this lifestyle are the crux of their prophetic stance.

For instance, 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

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<sup>12</sup> See Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to this Place*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1996), Vandana Shiva, *Stolen Harvest: The Hijack of the Global Food Supply* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), and Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

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.

Therefore an agrarian perspective is one that is critical of the industrial culture in terms of the end of its production chain as well as the means of production. This is the position from which agrarian thinkers are working. Industrialism places the utmost importance upon the end product while often ignoring the effects of the production cycle. As long as the end product is viable then any harm that the production cycle may inflict upon its producers and their context is permissible. Agrarians reject this assumption outright as short-sighted and dangerous.<sup>13</sup> As Berry notes, “the viciousness of a mentality that can look complacently upon disease as ‘part of the cost [of industrial agriculture]’ would be obvious to any child. But this is the ‘realism’ of millions of modern adults.”<sup>14</sup> An agrarian hermeneutic places a high importance on the health of

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<sup>13</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 28.

<sup>14</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 18.

what we create and how we create. The health of both the product and the process are linked together. You cannot have one without the other. It is from this hermeneutic that evangelical pastors have much to learn about pastoral ministry from their agrarian counterparts.

While pastoral ministry in our present context is widely defined depending on tradition and theological position, the dominant North American evangelical construction of pastoral ministry over the past number of decades has largely taken its cues from industrial culture. The effect of this industrial influence on the place of the pastor within the localized faith community has 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.<sup>15</sup> 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,

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<sup>15</sup> For an agrarian critique of “specialization” see Wendell Berry, “*The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character*” in *The Unsettling of America*, 17-26.

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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> Repeatedly denied parole during his forty-year tenure at Shawshank, 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.

Evangelical pastors indoctrinated with the industrial narrative are no different. To function within any organization one must come to learn the norms, language, taboos and

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<sup>16</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989)*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. *The Shawshank Redemption*. DVD. Directed by Frank Darabont (1994. Los Angeles: Castle Rock, 2007).

other social cues that create meaning and help 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, that is, ministry marked by the health of the end product to the exclusion of a healthy production cycle, one needs only to look at the assimilation of evangelical life and practice with the industrial ideal to see the adverse effects of an industrial pastoral ministry.<sup>18</sup>

For the industrial pastor, the tendency is to reduce everything to numbers. Spiritual growth is quantified into conversions, church attendance and the number of

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<sup>18</sup> For a practical antidote to this dilemma see Eugene H. Peterson, "The Unbusy Pastor" in *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 17-25.

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.<sup>19</sup> For every evangelical pastor knows the triumph of victory when a conversion takes place or when attendance is continually up on a Sunday morning. Yet, just like within industrial culture, 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. When pastoral ministry has been reduced to a quantifiable calculation where people exist in the realm of numbers then the entire congregation can be seen as shareholders while the pastor takes on the role of spiritual CEO. The value of anything within the Christian faith is directly linked to its quarterly performance report. In this industrial hermeneutic, growth takes the place of faithfulness thereby rendering Christian discipleship sterile.<sup>20</sup>

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. As I've noted, industrialism has conditioned its adherents to value efficiency and effectiveness over

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<sup>19</sup> See Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Revel: Where Are You? (South Barrington: Willow Creek Association, 2007)*.

<sup>20</sup> Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 32-33.

faithfulness. Within an industrial hermeneutic, 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?”<sup>21</sup> 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 the field and kills bugs 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 deception that industrialism has given us 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 way of life for the next generation. A farmer then must ask the question of faithfulness: “to what am I called and 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.

Industrialism has offered us a short-term hermeneutic and evangelical pastoral ministry has fully embraced this way of being. Evangelicalism has experienced tremendous amounts of numerical and influential growth over the fast few decades. Yet

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<sup>21</sup> Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 32.

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. 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. 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. They appear to be blind to some of the influences of industrial ways of life that have informed their theology of growth and effectiveness to the detriment of faithfulness.

Many 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. 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 an industrialized version of the Christian faith that have given me pause. 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, if it is only concerned with the end product (that is,

the label “Christian”) and not the production cycle (that is, process of becoming Christian), then it is not really good news.

For many pastors, 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup>

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. Agrarian thinking emphasizes the wholeness and the interconnectedness that is present between every moving part.

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<sup>22</sup> Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

Agrarian thinking asks questions of faithfulness, because its proponents are not primarily concerned with volume and price, like those caught in the web of the industrial economy. 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, ultimately our wholeness, 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.”<sup>24</sup> In order to further explore what agrarianism has to offer to pastoral ministry we will now explore the four dominant themes running through agrarianism along with how and why these themes should be embraced by those in the practice of pastoral ministry.

### **Theme 1: Faithfulness**

What I want to argue begins with a word that is found in the most limited of Christian vernacular, yet is often underemployed in the language and practice of pastoral work. That word is faithfulness. To be faithful is to remain loyal or committed to the

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<sup>24</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 26.

well being of a particular place, which is occupied by a particular people. In this sense pastoral work is the work of faithfulness.<sup>25</sup>

The antithesis of faithfulness is the contemporary notion of “success”, which is grounded in a bottom line of effectiveness and efficiency. The industrial pastoral landscape teaches us that the most successful pastor is the one who is most effective and efficient. This notion of success manifests itself in numerous ways including “the coercive power of empire, the power of wealth, or just simply *power* which becomes envisioned as the most ‘effective’ means of spreading the gospel, of furthering the influence of Christianity, of fostering the growth of the church, or of spreading ‘Christian morality’”.<sup>26</sup> Attempts at fostering a faithful Christian witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ often employ one or more of the aforementioned manifestations of success in order to justify their actions in the world. What I am offering is an alternative to the industrial mode of pastoral ministry in North America.

Within the Evangelical Movement the apex of successful pastoral ministry is measured by consumer statistics, that is, numbers showing growth in categories such as increased attendance and budgeted cash flow. This “captivity to market-driven materialism”, as Rah calls it, “results in greater respect being accorded to bigger and richer churches. The culmination of the captivity of the evangelical church to materialistic values is the church growth movement and the American megachurch.”<sup>27</sup> When one defines success using materialistic values one ends up with an emphasis on numbers and objects over and against people and relationships. Yet faithfulness in

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<sup>25</sup> See Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980).

<sup>26</sup> Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 50.

pastoral ministry is always marked by a relational dynamic. Faithfulness as a metric in pastoral ministry is grounded in the biblical and theological imperative of Christian discipleship. To be faithful in pastoral work one must use different definitions than those which are offered by the industrial cultural context and thereby employ different methods than those that are widely given in normative pastoral job descriptions. For the role of the pastor, if it is anything meaningful, must be grounded in faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And what might faithfulness look like? This is the question that is the crux of holistic pastoral ministry.

## **Theme II: Identity & Imagination**

In their provocative book “Resident Aliens”, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon provide us with a picture of faithful Christian practice that is grounded in the Gospel as a lived enterprise, not simply a static belief system:

Christianity is more than a matter of new understanding. Christianity is an invitation to be part of an alien people who make a difference because they see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ. Right living is more the challenge than right thinking. The challenge is not the intellectual one but the political one—the creation of a new people who have aligned themselves with the seismic shift that has occurred in the world since Christ.<sup>28</sup>

If the task of pastoral ministry is faithfulness then the way this faithfulness is lived out is through the reorientation of one’s life. Pastoral ministry begins with the imagination. The role of the pastor is to help himself and those that he is called to serve to a reorienting of their imagination that corresponds to their way of life being formed through the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

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<sup>28</sup> Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 24.

We see a biblical example of this reorienting in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Richard Hays provides us with a framework for understanding what Paul is attempting to do to the collective Christian identity and imagination of the Corinthian church. In writing of those that embody the Corinthian church, Hays says,

The "Israel" into which Paul's Corinthian converts were embraced was an Israel whose story had been hermeneutically reconfigured by the cross and the resurrection. The result was that Jew and Gentile alike found themselves summoned by the gospel story to a sweeping reevaluation of their identities, an imaginative paradigm shift so comprehensive that it can only be described as a "conversion of the imagination." Such a thoroughgoing conversion could be fostered and sustained only by a continuous process of bringing the community's beliefs and practices into critical confrontation with the gospel story.<sup>29</sup>

Because Jesus the Messiah has been raised from the dead, the entire realm of reality has been transformed, especially for those who believe. Belief in the biblical sense is not to be confused with our contemporary understanding of belief as a passive, static or lazy way of being.<sup>30</sup> Belief in the biblical sense is closely related to the idea of faith, that is, "an act of entrustment, the entrustment necessary if one is to continue following."<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the belief of the early Christians in Jesus as the Messiah was an active participation in God's new way of being.

Paul's work in this first letter to the Corinthians is centered on a call to re-imagine or re-conceptualize a way of life that is entirely different because of Jesus Christ. He is calling the Corinthian church to reshape its identity in light of the new reality of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God: that which Christ has ushered in, yet that which will not be fully complete until God makes all things new.

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 278.

<sup>31</sup> Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*, 278.

It appears that Paul was imploring his fellow believers to take on this new identity because they had yet to do so in the first place. Gorman writes that the Corinthian community was Paul's "problem child."<sup>32</sup> Paul's goal, Gorman points out, "became to convince the Corinthians to embody the cross in daily life in light of the past resurrection and soon return of their crucified Lord."<sup>33</sup> The natural question that arises is this: why should the Corinthian believers conform to a new way of life if Christ is set to return in the very near future? Paul's intention is not blind legalism. He is trying to spur on the collective imagination of a people who were harming each other, saying that they didn't have to live this way. Because Christ has ushered in a new way of living in relationship with each other, we don't have to function as we always have. There is now available to us a way of life that is ordered to the way of God. This way of life is submission to the mastery of Jesus Christ as Lord of all, and forsaking the mastery of the ways of evil. Put plainly, Paul saw his fellow believers in Corinth living in the same way they had always lived. His task is to offer a new way of life in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The old ways do not have to be the only ways. Another world is not only possible, but it is at hand.

Paul is calling the Corinthian church to be grounded in the cross of Christ. Yet, the Corinthian followers are, presumably, arguing that their sense of truth can be grounded locally in the dominant customs of Corinth.<sup>34</sup> Therefore Paul's task is to help

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<sup>32</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 227.

<sup>33</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 227.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 18.

them imagine a way of life that is outside of their local identity. He calls them over and over again to “flee” from the identity of Corinth and take on the identity of Jesus Christ. In doing so Paul provides us with a picture of pastoral ministry that is faithful to the Gospel. The role of the pastor is to continually call those around him to a new identity that is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ we no longer have to conform to the identity that is given to us by the dominant culture. We have a new way of living. And the role of the pastor is to continually call the faith community to remembrance of this new identity. To be a faithful pastor then is to remind those who one serves that their primary identity is not man or woman, father or daughter, American or Armenian, but it is Christian.

In this sense, faithfulness is not defined by tasks accomplished, but the ability to continually remind and re-imagine what Christian identity should look like in the face of cultural identity. Hauerwas and Willimon say this well:

The coming of Christ has cosmic implications. He has changed the course of things. So the theological task is not merely the interpretive matter of translating Jesus into modern categories but rather to translate the world to him. The theologian’s job is not to make the gospel credible to the modern world, but *to make the world credible to the gospel.*<sup>35</sup>

What Hauerwas and Willimon speak of here is exactly what Paul is getting at in 1 Corinthians. The role of the pastor is not simply to convince unbelievers that the Gospel is true. The role of the pastor is to continually remind believers where their true identity lies. In that sense, the role of the pastor is to help the world imagine what a life lived in devotion to the Gospel of Jesus Christ might look like. The pastor casts a vision for those within the faith community of a life lived well in light of the gospel.

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<sup>35</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*, 24.

Yet there are many factors that impede this way of pastoring within our context. In our post-Christendom culture pastors are viewed as friendly community organizers at best. They fill an antiquated role that is largely dispensable, much like farmers. When role of the pastor becomes quaint, even domesticated, as it has in our day, then one knows that pastoral ministry as it is meant to be practiced now stands a chance. When pastors find themselves in this position their calling is to be subversive.

### **Theme III: Subversion**

Peterson says that for a pastor to be subversive she must actively be “undermining the kingdom of self and establishing the kingdom of God.”<sup>36</sup> This work is for no fool. It is hard, long work. But it is the work of the pastor. This pastoral job description is found in the life and death of our Lord, Jesus Christ. By all Gospel accounts the ministry of Jesus was mysterious, confusing, understated and meant to be kept quiet. Only when his ministry became famous did it scare the religious leaders, which prompted them to kill him.

When a pastor is given a job description it is usually filled with responsibilities and tasks that she has little to no interest in doing. Pastoral search committees are largely made up of folks who have no clue what the realities of pastoral ministry entail. They do their best to write up a managerial job description that assumes the role of the pastor is administrative in nature, with a side description of “distributor of religious words and good.” Yet as Peterson writes,

This is not what most of us had in mind when we signed on. We had not counted on anything either so benign or so marginal. The images forming our pastoral

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<sup>36</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 27.

expectations had a good deal more fierceness to them: Moses' bearding the Pharaoh; Jeremiah with fire in his mouth; Peter swashbucklingly reckless as the lead apostle; Paul's careering through prison and ecstasy, shipwreck and kerygma. The kingdom of God in which we had apprenticed ourselves was presented to us as revolutionary, a dangerously unwelcome intruder in the Old Boy Club of thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers.<sup>37</sup>

In order to help acquaint one's parish with the Kingdom of God one must be subversive. The average parishioner knows not what the pastor does. If they did, they would not want a pastor. So the pastor must not be deceptive, but must be willing to give to her parishioners that which they do not know how to ask for. As Peterson says so well,

My long-term effectiveness depends on my not being recognized for who I really am. If [my parishioners] realized that I actually believe the American way of life is doomed to destruction, and that another kingdom is right now being formed in secret to take its place, [they] wouldn't be at all pleased. If [they] knew what I was really doing and the difference it was making, [they] would fire me.<sup>38</sup>

That is why pastors need to be subversive if they are to be of any help. Sometimes, the truth is too much to swallow in a single dose. A pastor's role then is to listen well to the context of the community, to the needs, the desires and the place of darkness, and then speak and live truth into those places. A pastor's role is to introduce her parishioners to "the real world and train them to live in it."<sup>39</sup> This training in subversion can be divided into three assumptions.

First, "the status quo is wrong and must be overthrown if the world is going to be livable."<sup>40</sup> The industrial dream is one where material consumption is the highest ideal. Industrialism has conditioned westerners to consume thoughtlessly by separating the relationship between the consumer and producer. The agrarian ideal aims to restore this

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 34

relationship where it has been broken and keep it intact where it has remained unbroken. Therefore the agrarian way is one where the status quo is always questioned. Pastoral ministry, under the tutelage of agrarian thought, must come to view the industrial narrative with skepticism, because the industrial narrative is opposed to the narrative of the Kingdom of God. A pastor's role then is to introduce her parishioners to the narrative of the Kingdom of God

Second, "there is another world aborning that is livable. It is in existence, though not visible."<sup>41</sup> This is the world that we must introduce to our parishioners. It is a world that is more real than the one that we claim to inhabit. It is the world that Jesus came to inaugurate into existence. It is the Kingdom of God. As Peterson says, "The subversive does not operate out of a utopian dream but out of a conviction of the nature of the real world."<sup>42</sup>

Third, "the usual means by which one kingdom is thrown out and another put in its place—military force or democratic elections—are not available."<sup>43</sup> Those of us who advocate for this kingdom are not in the majority. Yet we long for those that we serve to find their primary allegiance in the Kingdom of God as opposed to the kingdom of this world. Our task then is one of subversion. The economy of the Kingdom of God is so drastically different from our normative economy that we need some serious schooling, and a large amount of faith, in order to continue on the journey toward faithfulness. If pastors are to be helpful they must learn these assumptions of subversion and practice them among their parishioners.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 34

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 34

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 34

The reality is that this is an intensely difficult thing to do. For everything within our industrial narrative speaks of a different reality than that of God's kingdom. And so the real or unwritten pastoral job description begins: a pastor is one who introduces others into the reality of the kingdom of God. This is a new way of not only looking at the world, but an entirely new way of being in the world. Agrarians have much to offer pastoral ministry in this regard, for they are and have been rubbing against the industrial grain for some time now. The agrarian way of living offers an alternative to our industrial culture that is not only viable, but actually is a thriving way of life that values health and wholeness over fragmented living. Agrarians are well schooled in subversive activity and pastors have much to gain from their expertise.

Subversion is helpful as a pastoral value, yet it can only take one so far. One needs more structure if one is to imagine a different way of living. This is where the fourth theme of agrarianism comes into play.

#### **Theme IV: Husbandry**

Of all the themes I've introduced in this essay, in my estimation, husbandry is the one that has the most plausibility for concrete application, and therefore the primary theme that we can begin to structure an agrarian pastoral hermeneutic upon. Berry introduces us to this concept:

Husbandry is the name of all the practices that sustain life by connecting us conservingly to our places and our world; it is the art of keeping tied all the strands in the living network that sustains us. To husband is to use with care, to keep, to save, to make last, to conserve.<sup>44</sup>

Husbandry is the work of care. It is work that does not hold prejudice toward gender,

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<sup>44</sup> Wendell Berry, *Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009), 93.

race or creed. It is the relationally oriented work that humans engage in with that which has been entrusted to their care.

In the agrarian landscape, husbandry is a way of posturing one's self toward the gifts that one has been given. That is, land, animals, friends, family, etc. These are gifts because they come to us with a certain level of grace. They are not relationships that are earned. They are relationships that are either received or rejected depending on one's posture. In this sense, to husband is to see and to practice the relationality of God's grace or God's presence that is at work within and around one's life.

The industrial form of agriculture offers a contrasting narrative. Berry elaborates on this narrative by linking the beginning of the industrial way of life with the introduction of the tractor as the primary tool for proper agricultural work:

The tractor's arrival had signaled, among other things, agriculture's shift from an almost exclusive dependence on free solar energy to a total dependence on costly fossil fuel. But in 1950, like most people at that time, I was years away from the first inkling of the limits of the supply of cheap fuel. We had entered an era of limitlessness, or the illusion thereof, and this in itself is a sort of wonder. My grandfather lived a life of limits, both suffered and strictly observed, in a world of limits. I learned much of that world from him and others, and then I changed; I entered the world of labor-saving machines and of limitless cheap fossil fuel. It would take me years of reading, thought and experience to learn again that in this world limits are not only inescapable but indispensable.<sup>45</sup>

The industrial narrative is one of limitlessness. It is a narrative that is focused primarily on production to the detriment of all other factors. The agrarian narrative of husbandry is primarily focused on stewardship in the midst of production. It echoes the first theme we explored: faithfulness. Faithfulness always asks, "to what am I called and to whom am I

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<sup>45</sup> Wendell Berry, *Bringing it to the Table*, 91.

accountable?"<sup>46</sup> Inherent within this question is the notion of limits. As a pastor, one is called to work with a specific people in a specific place at a specific time. All of these categories have limitations. Yet the pastor is often seduced by the promise of industrial culture. That promise is the limitless potential of the pastor to dream and work into existence a community of people that are entirely different from that which he has been entrusted with. This is not an argument against a persistent hope for the Kingdom of God to enter into the consciousness of those who one works with. Rather, it is an admonition to those of us who work in pastoral ministry who have been entrusted with a particular community, yet work with that community as if their stories, their heritage and their place have nothing to contribute to the ongoing ministry of the church. The ecclesial enterprise is meant to be a shared endeavor between the members of the community with guidance and counsel provided by the pastor(s). Industrial pastoral ministry has taught us to listen to the stories of those outside of our communities in order to find a dream and direction for our own place. Yet to husband one's place is to listen to the collective hermeneutic of one's community. The stories and lives lived in beauty and brokenness will give the community its grounded-ness in the present and its trajectory for the future. Berry speaks to the ill effect of industrial forms of working when he says,

The almost exclusive emphasis on production permits the way of work to be determined, not by the nature and character of the farm in its ecosystem and in its human community, but rather by the national or the global economy and the available or affordable technology. The farm and all concerns not immediately associated with production have in effect disappeared from sight. The farmer too in effect has vanished. He is no longer working as an independent and loyal agent of his place, his family, and his community, but instead as the agent of an economy that is fundamentally adverse to him and to all that he ought to stand for.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Wendell Berry, *Bringing it to the Table*, 92.

It is this “exclusive emphasis on production” that I’m cautioning against. Husbandry is the work of being connected to one’s place, one’s locale.<sup>48</sup> For a pastor to engage in the work of husbandry she must ask questions such as, “What is the story of one’s community?” “What does that story have to say to how one pastors?” Agrarian farmers work well when they listen well to their land and to their community. They do this by working in and among what has been given to them. They cultivate, they grow, and they share what they harvest. They literally reap what they sow.

Industrial farmers on the other hand only listen to the demand of the market. The market demands bigger, better, faster, cheaper, and so the industrial farmer must be careless with the land and with the living creatures of the land in order to meet the demand of the market. This trend over the last number of decades has brought the industrial farmer upon the brink of disaster. They literally reap what they sow.

In light of this, pastoral ministry often takes one of two paths. Pastoral ministry patterned after the industrial culture is primarily concerned with growing more and better disciples. Industrial minded pastors create churches that attempt to “attract” those outside of the community to step through the doors of the church building. They attempt to reduce the Gospel to a short message, often a ten minute sales pitch, in order to create converts to their way of Christianity. Their methods to accomplish this often are very strategic, yet reductive. As Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago discovered, these methods often do not help people become long-term disciples of Jesus Christ.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 93

<sup>49</sup> Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Revel: Where Are You?*, 2007.

Pastoral ministry patterned after agrarian thought usually looks ordinary or slow. It is primarily concerned with growing more faithful disciples. Agrarian minded pastors work in seasonal rhythms and cycles that call their attention to the people who God has given to them. These pastors often do not grow large congregations. They often do not headline pastoral conferences. Their names are not known outside of their communities. Yet they practice a way of care-taking, a way of listening and a way of fidelity toward their location and vocation that is marked by a deep faithfulness to the God who manifests himself in ordinary daily displays of grace.

## **Conclusion**

I am often left to wonder what our churches and pastors can learn from the agrarian community. Some words that come to mind are restraint, wholeness, health and 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 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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