

Jesus Was a Country Preacher

Matthew 4: 13-17

Gary Farley

Center for Rural Church Leadership

On scores of occasions across several years a minister, one whom I had just met at some meeting at which I had spoken, has identified himself as being “*just a country preacher*”. The implication seemed to be that he was somehow inferior to those men who pastor those huge mega churches of modern suburbia. But then, in one of those wonderful inspired moments, God’s Holy Spirit prompted me to reply, “**So was Jesus**”. This transformed my understanding. I hope that it did his as well. I have thought about it a good deal since. I want to share with you the fruit of this reflection.

Yes, indeed. Jesus was a county preacher. Listen to how the Apostle Matthew tells the story of Jesus.

- He was born in the village of Bethlehem.
- He grew up and worked as a tradesman in the village of Nazareth.
- He made the small town of Capernaum the headquarters of his ministry.
- He toured the villages of Galilee teaching and healing folk
- He sent out the disciples to do the same among the villages of rural Galilee.
- He wrapped His spiritual truth in the everyday life experiences of rural people.
- He spoke to the everyday issues of rural life.
- He went a briefly to Jerusalem in order to die, only.
- After His resurrection Jesus returned to Galilee, to the sea side, to meet the apostles and issue this, our own, Great Commission.

In short, Matthew paints a picture of Jesus as a country boy, one who cared about the physical and spiritual health of country people. Jesus planted his life and ministry in a country place.

So, in our day when so many folk are using the question “What would Jesus do?” to provide moral guidance, a country preacher can, with godly pride, declare, “*I am doing what Jesus did*.” I am calling country people to repentance, to Kingdom citizenship, and to spiritual health.” Jesus chose to be a country preacher. That was His calling. Consider. Do not demean.

Why a Rural Strategy?

Given this incontrovertible fact, a question, in light of the emphasis of contemporary missiology on winning the cities, comes to my mind. How can we understand the strategy of Jesus to focus His work on rural people living in a back pasture area? “Why did Jesus select such a strategy for his mission here on earth?”

- Why did He not focus His ministry on Jerusalem?
- Why did He not try to address more directly the leaders of the Jewish religion?
- And why did He not go to Rome and confront the great Cesar?

It was in these cities where the people dwelt. It was there that power was centered. Given that he had such a brief time, would it not have been better stewardship to work were the masses were and gather as many disciples as possible? Does it not seem a little puzzling that Jesus would devote his life to the poor and the provincial people of Galilee? Let me share the answers that have come to my mind:

- Jerusalem was destined to be destroyed in just 40 years. And the church there was to be scattered. So, by kindling the fire in a more protected setting, Jesus knew it would continue for centuries to burn bright and pure. Galilee would be a place where generation after generation one could find those who knew those, who know those, who know those who had known Jesus.
- The people of Galilee were anxious for the Messiah to come. They knew far better than most that they needed a savior. Keeping the faith in a pluralist place like theirs was not easy. They suffered discrimination from the hands of both the Romans and the Jerusalemites. They were the “poor country cousins”. Here Jesus found fertile, rich soil into which the “root stock” of the Gospel could be planted and nurtured.
There it could grow strong and unmutated by false teachings and philosophies.
- Light shines the brightest in the darkness. There were so many other lights in Jerusalem and in Rome, that the light of the Gospel would have suffered from what today we call “light pollution”. In Galilee Jesus was like a comet in the night-time sky. Everyone came to hear Him and only Him. He had no real competition.
- The everyday life of rural Galilean communities—planting crops, tending sheep, fishing, caring for fruit trees and vineyards, gathering crops, and children at play—all provide a common set of experiences upon which Jesus could draw to explain the nature and purpose of the Gospel. In short Galilee provided a set of common experiences which Jesus could use to convey his good news.
- And, as our text indicates, Jesus had good news not only for the Jews, but for the Gentiles as well. Galilee was where the Jewish and the Gentile worlds overlapped. There the Gospel was heard and accepted by both groups.

So, I have concluded that for these five important reasons, and possibly others, Jesus deliberately elected to focus His ministry on rural Galilee. We can look back and see its wisdom although it violated what has become the “conventional wisdom” of contemporary missiology.

In North America, since the coming Europeans with the Gospel nearly four centuries ago, we have experienced the unfolding of a similar mission strategy. The evangelization and congregationalizing of America was largely a rural story for three centuries, until World War I. The root stock of the Gospel was planted in the country and has been carried to city in this

century, primarily. This is an exciting story, and because it is so, there is a very present temptation for us to neglect the very important task of protecting the root stock, of keeping the bright and pure light burning in rural America.

Looking specifically at our Southern Baptist experience, we were a rural denomination by location and by culture until World War II. When the industrialization in response to the war drew hundreds of thousands of rural Baptists to places like Ft. Worth to make airplanes, Baptists responded by forming several thousand new congregations in the cities, but these congregations continued to be rural churches, culturally.

The point is that God prepared Southern Baptists and our African American Baptist brothers and sisters in little country churches for centuries to impact the cities of America in the second half of this century by first planting and nurturing the Baptist movement in the rural South. Granted that we carried a lot of baggage to the cities that has kept us from doing the job there as well as we should have done it; still Baptists have done much good work in the cities. With the focus of the denominational leadership being to centered on the mega cities today we will continue to do good there, I pray.

However, I keep thinking of how T. B. Maston in speaking of change always warned his students by repeating an old Appalachian mountain epigram, "Be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water." Consequently, it is my sense that God has called me to sound a note of caution. It is just this. In our rush to "win" the cities, let us not fail to see that God is also at work in the countryside. In fact, the most significant work, missiologically and evangelistically, to be done in North America in the next couple of decades may well be in the countryside. I make this bold statement because the Rick Warrens, Bill Hybels and Tony Evans may have discovered already the models for contemporary city and suburban churches. The formula is in place. If you are reasonably bright and charismatic, you can be trained to do urban mega church work. It is in the rural setting among those who have left the cities to live in the countryside, the post-modern, post-industrial new pioneers, where some of the most creative mission work today is to be done. Listen as I attempt to unpack all of this.

Confronting Three Ruralism Myths

Unfortunately, there is present today a myth which denigrates and diminishes rural ministry. While it correctly notes that cities are growing larger and have large numbers of unchurched people, it concludes that the work in the rural places of America is completed. It notes that many rural communities are dying and claims that they all are. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Actually, it is anticipated that the US census for 2000 will find more people live in rural America than ever before. Certainly, there will be rural communities and rural counties which will experience population losses; but, many others, particularly those near cities and those with recreational amenities, will have experienced growth.

And there is a second myth which romanticizes rural people, rural pastors and rural churches. It paints a picture of universal godly stability. This too is wrong, wrong, wrong. Violence, racism, abuse, alcoholism, false doctrines, erroneous preaching, and poor weak churches are found in great abundance in rural America. This is certainly true in the third hole to

the right of the buckle on the Bible Belt where I now reside.

The third myth contends that all rural people are bumpkins. Not so. Not so. Not so. I am finding many, many bright, creative persons who have elected to pioneer in what Toffler has called the “electronic cottage”. Winning them will be a challenging task for a new wave of rural pastors. But to do so will furnish a great cadre of creative lay missionaries for the new century. Let me suggest that you read Leonard Sweet’s new book, *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café*, in which he models this point for us.

Unfortunately, there are many who have accepted these three myths related to rural ministry today, and consequently see the role of a rural pastor as being that of running a kind of hospice for a dying church. At best this is only one minor role for rural ministers. While most of us would not want to accept the role of helping a church die with dignity, this is a needed role that God wants some of us to perform at some point. God promised eternal life only to persons, not to congregations or other institutions. God does not abandon those who love Him. I know some ministers who are performing this role for whom I must have great admiration. But let me hasten to add that I know far more who are involved in very exciting and dynamic, and more appealing roles in rural ministry.

- I know **John Duncan** in Cassville, Missouri, an Ozark town of less than 2,500. He has taken a traditional county seat church and turned it into a full-service regional church which now regularly has more than 600 in worship.
- I know **Dennis Hampton** in the Sandhills of Nebraska who has started nearly a dozen rural congregations that are led by lay pastors. These churches get together occasionally for a large worship event. Several hundred attend. The focus of his ministry is on the training of the lay pastors.
- I know **Tim Jones** in Pickensville, Alabama. A bivocational pastor, who has taken a village church which was nearly dead, made it a regional church and grown it to where it regularly runs over 100 in worship. This is less than 10 years.
- I know a set of three young couples in McKinleyville, California, who have planted as the second Baptist church, a contemporary congregation that regularly runs 200 for worship in rented facilities.
- I know scores upon scores of ministers who are providing good worship experiences, discipling the saints, and ministering to their area in rural places. They have learned that there are significant rewards for those who God calls to shepherd a rural or village flock. In the small rural association which I serve there are 7 men who have been in their current pastorate for more than 10 years, three for more than 25. They have lived through ups and downs, revival and decline, joy and sadness. They have become a head of a loving family. God has blessed each of them in wonderful ways. These are my heroes in ministry.

I am looking forward to meeting soon a young pastor who has planted a church in the open country in central Missouri. His church has grown to over 100 in worship while seven passive old rural churches nearby continue to die out.

The Biblical Base

Certainly, you see my points. Rural ministry is what Jesus did. Rural ministry is an integral part of the larger strategy of growth for the Kingdom. Rural ministry is a varied, valuable, and often vibrant form of ministry. Certainly, we know that a total mission strategy must not neglect any peoples or any places where people dwell. The planting and expansion of the Kingdom of God called for the work of many persons. Each had a role to play. Some were on center stage, some on the periphery, some even back stage. But all were and are important.

If God places you in a rural place, do not let those who subscribe to the myths about rural ministry put you down. You just may be a part of the most significant developments in the mission of God for North America in this era. Suggest that those who might put down rural ministry read and reflect upon the following scriptures from Matthew's Gospel which I have taken for the text of my message:

24. **Matthew 4:12-17.** Jesus elected to focus his ministry in Galilee, a rural place.
25. **Matthew 10:5-15.** City is a mistranslation. We are talking village here. The first task He assigned to the disciples was to evangelize the villages. Certainly the location for evangelism was subsequently enlarged (Matthew 28:19-20), but there is no indication that the villages are to be neglected.
26. **Matthew 20:20-27.** Greatness is in serving. It just seems that serving comes naturally in a rural or a small town congregation. There seems to be a temptation in urban places to be cooped by the values of greatness which Jesus attributed to the gentiles in this passage.
27. **Matthew 22:36-40.** It appears that it is both easier and more difficult to love your neighbor and your God in a rural setting. At least one has to struggle more with loving specific persons, particularly.
28. **Matthew 23:23.** In a rural setting one can see the need for justice and mercy up close and personal. And this drives one back to faith. Those of us who minister need to look at the list of woes Jesus pronounces pretty often and be driven to our knees confessing our shortcomings.
29. **Matthew 28:10.** Jesus reconnected with the apostles in Galilee, as we know by the sea of Galilee.
7. No precise text, but remember, as one friend has insisted to me, Jesus was a member of a small rural church. His members were not much to brag about. They caused Him loads of disappointment. But in retrospect we see that His work was blessed.

Perhaps those of us God places in rural ministry have a particular blessing in that God connects with us more easily there. Further, we have the blessing of preaching to congregations whose life experiences have prepared them to understand the Gospel in its original cultural wrappings. And we have the blessing of knowing that if we build well we will leave a heritage that will continue for several generations, as contrasted with those who established urban neighbor

churches in the first half of this century. In many, if not most, instances, that congregation no longer exists in that place. The community has changed radically. This is not the case with rural churches. Like the Timex commercial, they just “keep on ticking”.

However, let us not in the rejecting of the myths which depreciates rural ministry fall in the ditch of depreciating metropolitan or suburban ministry. Each can and should be of God. Each is important to His Kingdom goals. Satan is alive and working in my rural community just as surely as he is in Ft. Worth, Los Vegas, New York or Lagos. Injustice, false doctrine, immorality, pride and sloth characterize the lives of many if not most of us in and out of our churches. We need to hear, believe, practice and share the Gospel. The Gospel must be proclaimed in all kinds of places to all kinds of people.

So, if you are serving a rural church today, rejoice. You are doing what Jesus did. If you go to a rural church after you finish your studies here, rejoice. You will be doing what Jesus did. If you go and plant a new congregation in a rural place, or among rural people, rejoice. You will be doing what Jesus did. And if your ministry is lived out ministering in a rural place to rural people, rejoice. This is what Jesus did.

Delivered at the Chapel of SWBTS, September 1998.