

## RURAL VALUES/CHRISTIAN VALUES

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Scarce is the country funeral where Psalms 23 is not read and commented upon. Usually, it is perceived by family and friends as a summary statement of the stockpile value around which the life of the deceased was organized. The Psalm affirms the life lived in a vital, experimental relationship with God, both in the good times and in the bad. It declares that in the face of life's vicissitudes, the one abiding, stable reality is the presence of a caring God.

Interestingly, sociological studies of rural values take little note of this value of experimental religion. Rather, they identify with integrity, independence, freedom, patriotism and the like.

The topic of values is a popular one today. Politicians and electronic media preachers speak fondly of our American values. Robert Bellah's recent bestseller, Habits of the Heart, is a detailed study of the competition between the values of individualism and of commitment to the larger group in our national experience. Bellah suggests that the victory of individualism threatens our American social fabric. However, he does not denounce the value of individualism, but rather he seems to suggest that Americans should hold these two values together in a kind of dynamic, dialectical tension. America is at its best when we affirm both the freedom of the individual and the importance of commitment to the whole simultaneously.

Both parts of this set of values find rootage in the Bible. The covenant with God concept can be the ground of commitment to the whole as can the Pauline analogy of member/body in speaking of the church (I Cor. 12:12-31). Conversely, individualism seems to be rooted, for conservative Christians at least, in the beliefs concerning the new birth, forgiveness and responsible discipleship.

Sociologist Bellah, however, fails to see that the apparent contradiction of these two basic values can be resolved only as one affirms and experiences the ultimate value stated in Psalms 23. In union with God one can affirm both personal freedom and corporate responsibility, stressing first the one and then the other as God directs in response to the needs of the context.

American farmers, like the Middle Class urbanites interviewed by Bellah and his associates, struggle to apply these values appropriately in their contexts. They are served by several other sets of values that inform their everyday lives as well. Space limitations will allow for little more than a quick holding up of some of the more obvious ones.

Diligent Work/Relaxation. Long ago wise King Solomon recognized the contextual nature of the appropriateness of values (Eccles. 3:1-8). Certainly, there is a time to plant (work) and a time to play or relax. Typically, rural people do both well and with success. There is a rhythm in the work and play of rural people, one that seems lost in the regime of industrialized, urbanized, "information age" life.

Conservative/Progressive. Jesus typified the best of both of these values. He came to fulfill, not to destroy the law, and in the Sermon on the Mount He raised its demands to new heights (Matt. 5:1-7;29). Yet he also warned us not to put "new wine in old wineskins." This was to say that the new covenant of grace could not be placed within the old covenant of the law (Eph. 2:8-9).

Sense of Place/A Pilgrim People. Like the Hebrew patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob, they identify deeply and emotionally with the possession and ownership of the land (Gen. 28:10-22, 22:1-35:15). Rural Americans pushed the frontier westward during the 19th century and in this century they left the farm for the industrial jobs of the cities. In the current farm crisis they face yet another frontier, its nature still unclear. Today's rural folk are restive because the crisis threatens their sense of place. They hope this journey will lead some direction other than away from the farm.

Patriotic/Incisively Critical. Like David during his time of wandering (I Sam. 26) rural Americans love the nation, in spite of policies that make their lives difficult. Most observers believe that the family farm is endangered. The economics' god, efficiency, has been enshrined. The farmers see themselves as being like Micah, Amos and Isaiah with a message from the true God, a warning, yet largely ignored (Micah 2:1-2, 6:8; Amos 5:10-24; Isaiah 5:8-10). This hurts them deeply.

Integrity/Sharp Dealing. When Jesus instructed the disciples to be as "wise as serpents, but gentle as doves" (Matt. 10:16) he was addressing this basic set of dialectical values. Farmers value integrity. They hate hypocrisy and sham. They demand that a person's walk match his talk. Most are not fooled easily or for long by talk alone. Yet they recognize that the world is full of phonies and shysters, and they like to seem them put in their place. Likewise, while they are very intolerant of religious falsehoods and fads, they affirm religious liberty. Conversely, they drive hard bargains. Peace is not to be purchased "at any price." But peace with whom all can live is to be sought actively.

Responsibility/Spontaneity. Jesus taught that his followers should be good stewards--wisely caring for and using the resources He provides (Luke 12:41-48). Many farmers do this very well. Yet Jesus also praised spontaneity, for example when Mary anointed his feet (Luke 7:36-50). Most rural folk are wonderfully spontaneous as well in their expressions and giving of love. Many are a great mixture of self-reserve and of fun-loving jokers. Also, they mix a strong reverence for the general commands of God which they obey faithfully, with an openness to the leading of God's Holy Spirit in a given context.

In summary, I would argue that these six sets of values grounded in love for the ever abiding Father God are among the most important basic Christian values expressed in rural settings--the values that should inform and guide every life. They come to us in dialectical or paradoxical form because either side of any set can easily become a false god. So it is only when affirmed with its opposite that one is safe from idolatry.

It is important that those who seek to pastor churches comprised of rural people understand these values and their dialectical relations. Ministers will be more effective when they understand that these values inform the perspectives, perceptions and the performances of their people. Ministers will also be able to recognize when a person's commitment to one side of a dialectic or set of values has become idolatrous. And they may recognize that some folk err not in what they value, but in the appropriateness of the value of the context in which they are acting.

## Sources

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