

Rural Values, Christian Values

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Politicians and media preachers speak fondly of our “American values” today.

Robert Bellah's best-seller of a few years ago, *Habits of the Heart*, provides a detailed study of competition between values of *individualism* and of *commitment to the larger group* in our national experience. Bellah suggests that individualism's victory threatens our American social fabric.

He does not denounce the value of individualism; 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 it affirms both the freedom of the individual and a commitment to the whole.

Both elements of this set of values find roots in the Bible. The *covenant with God* concept can ground 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 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 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.

Diligent Work-Relaxation. Long ago, wise King Solomon recognized that context determines the appropriateness of values (Eccl 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 5:1-11). 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 Hebrew patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, farmers identify deeply and emotionally with possession and ownership of land (Gen 15; 28:10-22). Rural Americans pushed the frontier westward during the 19th century, and in the 20th century they left the farm for industrial jobs in the cities. In the current farm crisis they face yet another frontier, its nature still unclear. Today's rural folk are restless because the crisis threatens their sense of place. They hope this journey will lead in some direction other than away from the farm.

Patriotic-Incisively Critical. Like David during his 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 economists' 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 addressed 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 see 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 which all can live is to be sought actively.

Responsibility-Spontaneity. Jesus taught his followers to be good stewards—wisely caring for and using the resources he provides (Lk 12:41-48). Many farmers do this very well. Yet Jesus also praised spontaneity—for example, when Mary anointed his feet (Lk 7:36-50). Most rural folk are wonderfully spontaneous as well in their expression and giving of love. Many display a great mixture of self-reserve and fun-loving activity. Also, they mix a strong reverence for God's general commands, which they obey faithfully, with an openness to the unique 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 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. It is only when affirmed with its opposite that one is safe from idolatry.

Those who seek to pastor rural churches must understand that these values—and their dialectical relations—inform the perspectives, perceptions and performances of their people. Ministers will also be able to recognize when a person's commitment to one side of a set of values has become idolatrous.

And they may recognize that some folk err not in what they value, but in that value's appropriateness given the context.

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