

THE CRESSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

Michaelmas 2007

The Work of Our Hands

Two Farmers' Reflections

Fred Bahnson and Richard Church

But we urge you, beloved, to... aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

1 Thessalonians 4:10–12

We're shoring up an old tobacco barn. When we're finished the lower level will be a hog shed where Rich will keep his feeder pigs. But we're far from done; the posts holding the south wall's sill have collapsed. We get out the jacks, position them under the sill, and begin cranking. The entire south wall rises. Hay scraps and mouse droppings spill from the second-story floor slats. Old boards still remember the shape they once wore, and with a few more cranks the wall returns to almost square. We move quickly now. With jacks in place we dig new footings, then pour concrete around the posts that will hold the wall permanently in place. By day's end we are tired. After putting away the tools, we head up to the house and join our families for supper.

We swap labor, working on each other's farms on the odd Saturday. It's an old form of exchange: work a day for me; I'll work a day for you. We get more accomplished this way, but it's not simply the end product that matters. We're building lasting bonds of friendship forged from shared physical labor.

Both of us were trained as academics, yet both us also claim the title "farmer." Rich owns a small pastured-meats farm. Fred manages a church-

THE CRESSET

supported community garden. We both seek to run our farms with old knowledges that rely on hand tools and community in lieu of the solitary tractor and plow. And so our work now requires the use of both our minds and our bodies. It's a balance we have come to cherish. The work of our bodies leads to the work of reflection, and vice versa, which causes us to suspect that there's something to be found in the activity of farming that's missing in what commonly passes for "physical activity."

Despite living in a culture that looks down on those who labor with their hands, we have come to believe that good work must involve our bodies. In pursuit of this work, we are attempting a social descent out of the isolated confines of the life of the mind, into the communion of those who labor with their bodies. It is an awkward descent. We lack the practical skills basic to those who labor. We speak the language of the elite, a dead give away that we are not from the community we seek to join.

Yet we work on the land. And our work has changed us, leading our bodies—and our thoughts—away from the bankrupt mentality of the consumption economy toward a godly economy of abundance and Sabbath. Further, given that we worship a God who took on flesh, we have come to believe that physicality isn't something of which to be ashamed nor something to be shirked; it is one of God's blessings. Yet as with all of God's gifts, it carries *terms of usage*. It matters what we do with our bodies. This is our aim in the work we do together on our farms and in this essay: to explore the significance of the work of the farmer to the life of Christian discipleship.

The Good of Bodies

Any discussion about good work, however, begins with the question of bodies themselves. Why do we have bodies and for what should we use them? How one answers this question is crucial to one's understanding of the gospel. As we understand it, bodies were at the heart of the early church's sense of itself. The *body* became a necessary and defining metaphor for the church's understanding of itself and of who Jesus was. The one the church called Christ was made of flesh and bone. The church itself is "the body of Christ" in Paul's words (1 Cor. 12).

The formation of bodies then became essential to the church's life. We have both come from evangelical roots. We both "accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and savior" as children. But contrary to modern Christian

THE CRESSET

practice, in which this anemic intellectual assent to Jesus suffices as faith, the church throughout most of its history has insisted that the life of discipleship entails *the formation of one's body*. To be Christian is to conform oneself not only mentally and spiritually—but bodily—to a cruciform existence. It is within the church's sacramental life, a set of practices largely incoherent within the modern church's account of faith, where we undergo this physical formation. We do not merely accept Jesus verbally but bodily, allowing the church to bury our bodies—then proclaim them raised—in the waters of baptism. We eat the bread and drink the wine that the church declares the flesh and blood of Christ. Faith was and remains about what one does with one's body, which is why we think it is not surprising that the first questions on which the Acts community was called to opine was not that of creed but foreskin and diet (Acts 15).

Of course, creeds flow from practices such as circumcision and eating. In fact, as we understand it our ability to know is determined by our physical practices, which means that unless our bodies are rightly formed, we cannot *know* the goods of Christianity. This is how much is at stake; our physical lives and the activities that shape them make us who we are. Habits are identity. As the Orthodox poet Scott Cairns suggests, the worry is not so much that we be saved from hell as saved from our habits. Salvation *is* sanctification, and the tedious rituals of worship are the means by which new and holy habits are formed.

A Theology of Farming

But one's formation should not be limited to the sanctuary. It should extend to the fields in which we labor and by our labor are remade. To work in the fields is to take part in an ancient drama beginning with Adam and Eve, whose Garden mandate is ours as well: "to serve and to keep" the fertile soil on which all



Sharecroppers chopping cotton near White Plains, Georgia.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

THE CRESSET

life depends (Gen. 2:15). Serving and keeping the soil, that is, gardening or farming, connects us to the primordial story in a way that's embodied. We are in God's good garden of the creation, we have damaged it by our hubris, and we must bear the consequences. Therefore, as we see it the life of Christian discipleship can never escape the work of serving and keeping the soil and the garden.

To return to the work of garden and pasture is to learn again of our sin and of God's grace. The Fall is real; the ground is cursed, especially the variety locals here call "Carolina Clay." Our life on the farm has been a return to this struggle. We fail often. It is the reality of farming. The rain does not come, then comes too much. The sun shines but also burns. A beet crop fails; lambs die. Our work seems cursed at times, the victim of the heat of the Carolina Piedmont and our own lack of knowledge. When we hear each Lent, "from dust you came and to dust you shall return," it's a reminder that despite all our efforts we often labor in vain.

Yet in the midst of this struggle, grace emerges. Our daily bread is grown from the fruits of our labor. Food is not a mere commodity that the industrial economy manufactures in a laboratory but is rather the continuation of God's good creative activity. Food is soil, the *adamah* by which the *adam* is fed (Gen. 2:7); it is still the rich *humus* that feeds the *human*. And so we have come to believe that tending the garden can be good work as well, because on the best days such work anticipates the communion of human, beast, plant, and soil to which the Prophets allude and the new creation of which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians. When plants break forth from dormant seeds, when new lambs are born out of hidden wombs—with the paltry assistance of our labor—we see a fragmented reflection of grace itself. A fallen creation still bears the imprint of its faultless creator, and through participating in this creation we catch a momentary glimpse of the coming restoration of all things in Christ.

I, Fred, run a church-sponsored garden. The garden has grown from a vision of communion and reconciliation. Part of that reconciliation involves being a host site for kids working off their community service hours earned after having run afoul of the law. Many of them are amazed to simply watch a plant grow. They come on a given Saturday to dig a raised garden bed, amend it with chicken manure, and plant tiny seeds. When they return after weeks of rain and sun they see new life springing forth from those seeds.

THE CRESSET

Often they can't name it as such, but they have seen the gifts of God made manifest by the work of their hands.

This is why we work with our bodies, serving the fertile soil. Because in doing so we aim to serve in the manner of Jesus. Creation itself is sanctified by Christ's embodiment and our mode of being in the world is displayed in Christ's bodily life, culminating in the cross. To claim the full humanity of Christ is to claim that Christ's body, even in the resurrection, was formed from dust. The soil of the garden is further sanctified by incarnation. As our mentor Stanley Hauerwas suggested in a sermon preached at the baptism of Rich's son and step-daughter, "Jesus' body is the new land." For the children of Abraham, their inheritance was the *land*; for followers of Jesus, our inheritance is the new land of Christ's body whose visible form is the church. This land includes all of creation, which Christ created and redeemed. Soil, crops, our place on earth, all count within the purview of God's care and our call to care. Our mandate is still to serve and to keep the fertile soil just as Christ served with and sacrificed his body; and that service is both to the soil of our gardens and the soil of Jesus' body, the church. The goal of such serving and keeping is that our lives become a sustained note of praise.

So too the tedious work of farming, we believe, conforms our bodies to a cruciform existence. In farming we are broken, given to others, and renewed by the very act of giving. Manual labor, especially the work of cultivation and care of the fertile soil, is part of the formation necessary to know God and rightly engage our fellow creatures and the creation. As we reclaim the tasks of caring for "the least of these," be they plant, animal, or person, our pride is reshaped. We learn that there is no task that we are too good to perform. Likewise, there is always time enough in the kingdom of God to serve the least of these.

I, Rich, also work as a lawyer. My time is bought and sold in six-minute increments. Those six minutes are highly valued in the market economy. Six minutes on a contract is more valuable to the market economy than the six minutes a migrant farm worker spends picking tomatoes. Likewise, my time is valued without regard to season or Sabbath. The church's calendar of sacred time, the biblical gift of Sabbath to human and land are ignored. But, of course, the market economy's accounting of time and value is wholly corrupt in God's economy. Creation names the goodness of time given by God for holy work. Thus, working on a farm is an antidote to the misshaped

THE CRESSET

notions of time embedded within the practice of law. Mucking out a birthing pen, carrying fresh water to a sheep pasture, observing the passing of seasons with the work and limits appropriate to them—all help retrain us to understand sacred time and value.

Misshaped Bodies

In contrast, our culture, in which bodies are alternately glorified and degraded, encourages the pursuit of physical activities entirely disconnected from any coherent goal for a human life. For example, we each have come to believe that the expression of our physical lives prior to becoming farmers was directed toward misbegotten ends. For Fred it was mountain climbing; for Rich, endurance running. Both of us became immersed in athletic subcultures that, while focused on the body, did so in a way that was disconnected from the practices necessary to sustain them or a common life.

Rock climbing and running in the context of America are bourgeois pursuits, done for the sake of pleasure that benefits none but the doer. Hauling one's body up a 20,000-foot peak in the Bolivian Andes or running 26.2 miles of asphalt—such “sports” require tremendous and gratuitous outputs of physical energy and drain the human body. Climbers and runners can't stop to eat, can't afford to direct blood flow to digesting normal food. Instead, they eat numerous small servings of highly-processed energy packs. Not food but a laboratory-made conglomeration of molecules, rendered both palatable and addictive by injecting glucose and caffeine and given a catchy package and brand name.



West Texas farmer prepares to sow millet.
Library of Congress Prints and
Photographs Division.

Likewise, alpine climbing and distance running both require immense outputs of emotional and spiritual stamina. We say “spiritual” because these are not just pursuits of the body but of the soul. To subject one's body to hunger, thirst, extreme temperatures, long hours, and even days that vary between extremes of pain and bliss, loneliness and camaraderie, adrenaline highs and ennui, is to engage in

THE CRESSET

an act of spiritual devotion. To narrow one's life's focus to a single climb or long-distance run—effectively *offering* one's life to such a pursuit—is to assume a posture not dissimilar to worship. And for what purpose? Who is served in these extended trips of body and soul, or rather, to whom are such acts of supplication directed? As we understand it now, to engage in such “sport” is to genuflect before foreign gods. They were frivolous acts made to appear heroic by a society that tells us we have time and energy to waste, a society of pleasure-seekers who must finally admit that we have no clue what we should be doing with our bodies.

But more common than extreme over-use is extreme under-use, whereby bodies become abstractions, parodies of their formers selves. A culture such as ours is paradoxically obsessed with both sport and lassitude. Should we desire it there is a machine designed to “free” us from nearly every physical task—including the tractor to replace the scythe and hoe. Thus, we are “free,” and in fact damned in a culture of ever increasing production requiring commensurate increases in consumption. Industrial agriculture has replaced malnutrition with obesity. While other countries starve, Americans eat themselves to death. What slavery, the Industrial Revolution, and now Information Technology all share in common is this same mistaken assumption: that there can be in this world an end to physical work, if not for everyone then at least for the privileged. As Garret Keizer writes in *Harper's*, “[A] culture that has as its highest aim the avoidance of anything remotely resembling physical work must change its life. If you want an inconvenient truth, there it is: that the very notion of convenience upon which our civilization rests is a lie that is killing us.”

The Body of the Other

Any culture that does not value manual labor, such as farming, demonstrates a fundamental disrespect for the body. Such disrespect would be one matter if it were limited to the way we treated our own bodies. But of course, the history of American slavery is enough to teach us that such disrespect isn't limited to individuals and their personal habits. As Wendell Berry has shown in *The Hidden Wound*, such disrespect of other bodies is inexorably linked to disrespect of the land and of people. Berry argues that whites destroyed the fertility of the land *because* they imposed its work on others, thereby relinquishing the *experience* of the land as well. “The white

THE CRESSET

man, preoccupied with the abstractions of the economic exploitation and ownership of the land, necessarily has lived on the country as a destructive force, an ecological catastrophe, because he assigned the hand labor, and in that the possibility of intimate knowledge of the land, to a people he considered racially inferior; in thus debasing labor, he destroyed the possibility of a meaningful contact with the earth.”

Likewise, other bodies are needed for the times when mechanical bodies can't do the work we refuse to do. When someone is needed to clean up our children's messes, grow and harvest our food, or scrub our toilets, we need only pay other people, whose bodies are now at our command. We used to call those bodies “niggers.” We now call them “Mexicans,” a catch-all word naming not so much nationality as social standing. Berry calls this *niggerfication*—making someone do the work you think yourself above doing. In my (Fred's) part of the North Carolina Piedmont, there is widespread understanding that the most unpleasant jobs are best hired out to “Mexicans.” When needing to get a ditch dug, a floor scrubbed—really any task where the doer might get soiled or sweaty—people speak of needing to “git me a Mexican.” The resonance of ownership remains in such language in which the other is given no particular name but is reduced to cultural object. Having bought the “Mexican's” labor, his or her body is yours. The phrase *git me a Mexican* is simply a culturally-acceptable update of *git me a nigger*. Let the Mexican get his hands dirty, let *his* sweat darken the wood on our shovels.

As we see it, those whose affluence insulates them from the gift of laboring in the fields and garden continue to miss out on what the Mexican, and the black man before him, may have gained in the process of being forced to do that work. Says Berry: “It seems to me that the black people developed the emotional resilience and equilibrium and the culture necessary to endure and even enjoy hard manual labor wholly aside from the dynamics of ambition. And from this stemmed an ability more complex than that of



Farming a field near Eutaw, Alabama.
Library of Congress Prints and
Photographs Division.

THE CRESSET

the white man *to know and to bear life*. What we should have learned willingly ourselves we *forced* the blacks to learn, and so prevented ourselves from learning it” (emphasis ours).

This is of course dangerous ground, for we are not the people to name what may or may not have been or is being gained by African Americans or Mexicans in the physical labor they have had forced upon them. Yet we have had the chance to observe these matters to some extent. I, Rich, was a member of an African American congregation for a time before moving to our farm. That church was founded at the end of the Civil War as a place of worship for freed slaves, and the church had a long memory of its past saints who left the fields of slavery and reentered them as share croppers, which was slavery of a different sort. Farm stories were prominent in that community still, even though the church was now largely upper middle-class. But there was a paradoxical nature to the stories told there. The community regularly celebrated the virtues learned in the demanding heat of tobacco farming. Yet it also celebrated having left that labor behind. It is this duality with which we are trying to struggle. African American communities are right to name their life on the farms of America as slavery. But we also wonder if something vital has not been lost in the exodus of African American communities away from the land. We cannot help but wonder this: does African-American religious life thrive in part because African American communities still have a living memory of what it means to work with one’s hands?

Nonetheless, as we name the necessity of manual labor and encourage others to return to the fields, we must note both the joy of that work and the ways our own ancestors made that good work into a form of abuse for others. That history cannot be ignored. For example, as I, Fred, struggle to create a place of reconciliation between blacks, whites, and Latinos in our church’s community garden, I must remind myself that for African Americans the fields have not always been a place of restoration and healing. My own ancestors took the gifts of manual labor, turned them into a burden, and set that burden down upon unwilling shoulders. Thus, my black neighbors may view the chance to take up a hoe with me, the great-grandson of a slave owner, as an offer of limited appeal. Likewise, we both have to live within our own experience of white, middle-class affluence. Our return to the land has been and remains by choice. For us to take up the farmer’s hoe is a very different act than for a person who has no other option.

Conclusion

Farming is a form of work that is sorely missing in a world of assembly lines and bureaucracies. Essayist Scott Russell Sanders puts it this way: “When the freedom and craft have been squeezed out of work it becomes toil, without mystery or meaning, and that is why many people hate their jobs. Toil drains us; but good work may renew us, by giving expression to our powers. Work shapes our body, fills our thoughts and speech, stamps our character.” To learn the good and mysterious work of farming is to be trained into the life of the body of Christ and that mystical union of creature with Creator for which we aspire.

It’s been three years since we rehabilitated that old barn, and despite our limited carpentry skills the barn still stands. The new posts we sistered to the old sill have become a favorite scratching post for the hogs. Those hogs have been sustained on the pasture that surrounds that barn, and in turn the pasture—fescue, timothy grass, and clover—has grown particularly lush from the hog’s manure. The hogs have also sustained our families, when we have broken bread and shared the flesh of those hogs around a common table. For this work of our hands and its fruits, the only proper response has been to praise God from whom all blessings flow. ✠

Fred Bahnson is a farmer and writer living in Efland, NC. His poems and essays have appeared in Orion, Sojourners, and Christian Century. His essay “Climbing the Sphinx” will be included in the 2007 Best American Spiritual Writing (Houghlin Mifflin).

Richard Church is a farmer and lawyer living in Coolridge, NC. He has written extensively on Christianity and the law. His work has appeared in the Journal of Law and Religion and the Notre Dame Law Review. His book, A Litigation Ethic: The Challenge to Christians in the Courts is forthcoming (Herald Press).