

Critique of the New Agrarian Movement With Some Implications for the Church

ITHAKA FELLOWSHIP FRIDAY NIGHT LECTURE

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INTRODUCTION

How many of you are familiar with the New Agrarian movement? Or have heard of it? To be sure, it's not a mainstream topic. It's primarily found on the social margins of American society, and so if you have bumped in to it, most likely you wouldn't have known it. But that is changing. And so I'm glad you are here tonight.

By way of introduction, I'd like to begin in the year 1930. That is the year Harper & Brothers published a symposium entitled, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. In this book, twelve men sought to do what seemed to be the impossible. Guided by the old values and vision of our Founding Fathers, they labored to revive and defend a coherent set of beliefs that were quickly becoming passé in the new and fast-changing world of the 20th century.

The core values expressed and defended by the "New Agrarians" (which, by the way, is a phrase coined by Herbert Agar to distinguish them from Jeffersonian movement in the early 1800s) were the fruit of a large interpretive project. Spearheaded by Daniel Davidson, this motley crew of historians, professors, poets, political scientists, and journalist stood on the precipice of a seismic cultural shift and labored to convey with one voice a dying conception of what it meant to live a good life.

Specifically, by extolling the value of marriage and home-life, esteeming family as the true foundation of society, commending the arts and amenities of life, stressing the necessity of religion, earnestly defending land ownership and the sacredness of rural life, and by defining work and man's proper place in the created order, the twelve sought to address the basic questions of human existence, and in so doing, issue a clarion call to their generation to hold fast to a way of life where the goodness of life was not measured by material values, but spiritual ones.

Contrary to popular opinion, the agrarian thinkers, or "literary farmers" as some liked to call them (for none of them were actually farmers, though they each were raised there), argued neither for social structuring, nor from the growing pain of nostalgia. Rather, they simply believed that the emerging spirit of the 20th century, a spirit completely antithetical to the vision of the Founding Fathers, was a predatory spirit: a spirit, if left unchecked and unbalanced, that would only increase in power, dominate, and ultimately lead to deracination – which is the uprooting of all the human and moral traditions that create order, beauty, and stability within a society. In other words, by simply affirming what they perceived to be timeless values, values rooted deeply in creation, esthetics, biblical ethics, and God's

providence, they aimed to preserve and defend the wisdom that once birthed and nurtured the soul of America.

Now with that said, the question is this: did anyone listen? Without a doubt, Harper's symposium commanded an audience. It created quite a stir when it was first released. In fact, they were chided severely by many in the media and their academic and professional circles. As agrarian men, like the old preachers of yesteryear, they were not afraid to evangelize and step on toes, hoping to rally, convert, or at least disturb the thinking of their opposition. But at the end of the day, history shows us that very few people actually gave them a chance. Very few minds were converted or provoked, and at best only a few minority groups within the country rallied around them, echoing the same concerns and convictions regarding the hidden trappings of modernity.

Now given the weight of their argument, and it is significant – after all, an epochal past is a better sage than any futuristic dreamer – then why the failure to connect? Why were they written off? Well, notwithstanding the many socio-historical factors available for critique, and there are many, I believe the failure of the Agrarian Project to persuade Americans in the 1930s is linked to two suppressive forces, forces that are still powerfully at work today, quietly squelching any and all voices that would depict a life radically different from the one offered by popular culture. These forces set forth the substance and contour of this present fallen world, giving form and opposition to all who desire to walk contrarily. Most assuredly, we feel their presence in the Church today and we most certainly see the conflict depicted within our nations values, a conflict that is artfully exposed by one of the most celebrated voices of the agrarian movement thus far, that being the farmer and poet, Wendell Berry.

THE NATURE OF PROGRESS

So what are the two forces? Well to begin with, the New Agrarians were fighting a giant of biblical and international proportions. Specifically, they were confronting a modern force called Progress. Now, what is Progress? It is a word that gets a lot of attention today. And it can be used a number of ways, both good and bad. Tonight, I want us to think about it in the terms of a worldview. A worldview, in its simplest terms, is a set of beliefs about the things that matter most in life. For example, if I were to dump a puzzle on the floor, the picture on the box would serve as a worldview. It would provide you with a conceptual framework in which to put the pieces together properly. The same is true in life. Every one of us here has a worldview, wisely or foolishly, that helps us make sense of reality and helps us sort through the many choices offered in life.

As Bible-believing followers of Christ, we call our framework a “Christian” worldview. Scripture, in other words is our authority. And that authority teaches us how to look at all of life. For example, Scripture not only tells us how to be forgiven, but it has much to say about creation, the care of creation, the human soul, friendship, how relationships work best, our purpose and place within the created world, etc. And these biblical convictions should ultimately shape how you and I choose to relate to all of life.

Well, simply put, Progress is a competing worldview. Progress, in many ways, is the child of two conceptual parents called Naturalism and Humanism. The first basically assumes there is no God, making science a religion, and the second believes man is the center of all things, which ultimately leads one to think that every problem can be fixed by man with enough time, talent, technique, and money. Now these are false assumptions, and they are obviously more subtle and nuanced than I have made them out to be, but they are, nonetheless, leading many well intentioned folk to believe they can improve the world and overcome the growing conflicts between individual concerns and social goods without any intervention on the part of God. And that kind of blind presumption is what the New Agrarians were up against.

And so by the 1930s, the wheels of Progress were rolling, and they were not likely to be stopped or redirected by twelve southern men pining for the tried and true ways of the past. By way of the media, political rhetoric, and educational system of the day, a new democratic citizenship was being minted. America was being steered and guided by the union of politics and the industrial sciences, not God and biblical traditions or principles. And so any and all voices that questioned this utopian hope of a better world, through the promises of modern Progress, were going to be quickly relegated to the margins of life and identified as echoes of a detached and by-gone age.

Now, I might add that this view on the general nature of life was strongly nurtured by what the Agrarians called the “gospel” of Progress. This pseudo-gospel promised comfort, security, happiness, and prosperity if Americans would simply put their hope for a better tomorrow in the Darwinian forces of science, industry, medicine, education, transportation, and technology, and the like. The American Dream had a new narrative, in other words. If you would like to have some anecdotal evidence of what I am saying, all you have to do is go down to Forrest Park in St. Louis, Missouri and tour the 1904 World’s Fair Museum. One will hear the clarion call of this new gospel, as it is etched within the historic displays. The slogans of the Progressive Movement are all there, promising the dawn of a new humanity, a world free from sickness, poverty, disease, and the like through human innovation. It truly is amazing to see.

And the bottom line is that America believed it. By the 1920s, this pseudo-gospel was the creed of the masses, giving birth to a new ethic within the land. Newness became virtue, oldness vice. The old became inferior, the modern valuable. It mattered not where one worked or lived. Americans everywhere fell hook-line and sinker. From the marbled halls of Washington, D.C. to the nondescript row houses of the inner city, millions believed human innovation, not Judeo-Christian wisdom, would satisfy the human ache for order, security, and peace, and well being. The Sirens of Progress had done their job. Gone were the old and archaic solutions to life’s problems. The good life was redefined.

THE NATURE OF POLITICS

Which is why the New Agrarians took their stand. They understood the pride and destructive power of modernity and its Progressive Movement. But the question in need of answering next is this: whom did they choose to stand with? In other words, who did they enlist to fight the good fight with them? This is where things get interesting.

General consensus tells us that the Agrarian Project would have begun and ended with the book *I'll Take My Stand* were it not for two prominent failures in America. The first was President Hoover's administration and the second was the Great Depression. You see, for about fifty years it looked as if the Progressive Movement was right. From about 1880 to 1929, things were booming. Life was good. But after Hoover and the collapse of the nation's economy, the New Agrarians didn't seem so out of step as before. And so they were given a second chance to make their case for political reform, family values, less government, land ownership, and more localism or regionalism. This opportunity, however, lured them into the vortex of the second most suppressive force, that being the destructive nature of politics.

As just stated, prior to the Great Depression, when things were going well for about fifty years, Americans did not have the patience for the "humane virtues of a simpler, more elemental, non-acquisitive existence." Progress was king. But confidence in the kingdom of technological power started to waiver in 1931. Its promise of change was proving to be weak and vulnerable in the growing wake of economic uncertainty. One-third of the American workforce was unemployed. Shops on Main Street were closing. Banks were failing. Stomachs were empty. Real solutions to life's growing problems were desperately needed.

So in 1932, the year Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President of the United States, the old archaic ways were revisited and new counsels were opened. Opportunities to present a more concrete and viable agrarianism were finally made available. But instead of addressing the anxieties of the nation by taking their message directly to the people, their personal fears led them elsewhere. Fearing the New Deal would pass them by; half the original group did the unthinkable. They ignored their own advice by hitching their wagon to the new political machine revving up in Congress. While lobbying for social reforms and publishing political opinions, they worked tirelessly to present a form of agrarianism that could easily be translated into social policy.

It's at this point that the message of the New Agrarian movement becomes convoluted and somewhat hard to follow. Succumbing to the lure of social change via political means, the door was opened for all manner of neoconservative styles to merge and join their cause. Each advocated federal interventions of their own philosophical make and moral model, making negotiations and philosophical purity difficult to achieve.

For example, in the 1930s and 40s European traditionalists, medievalists, proponents of "forty acres and a mule" and the "country living" advocates all lobbied Congress under the New Agrarian banner. In the 1950s and 60s the conservation movement, environmental movement, along with the century-old teachings of transcendentalism took their place at the table, as well, each espousing their own version of the Agrarian Project. Now, one is still able to look back and sift through each monolithic group and identify the true spirit of the new Jeffersonian agrarians (over 150 doctoral dissertations have proven this), but over time and as the years passed, what happened is that the grinding gears of the political machine did more to crush, confuse, and cripple the Project, rather than clarify or persuade the public of its simple yet life changing message.

INFLUENCE OF WENDELL BERRY

Which brings us to the farmer, essayist, novelist, and Baptist, Wendell Berry. The movement has gone through a bit of a rebirth through his writings. Born in 1934, Wendell has farmed for about half his long life. He went to the University of Kentucky in the 1950s to study English. He studied for a time at Stanford. Received a fellowship in Italy. And then taught writing at the University of Kentucky till about 1977. It's at that time that he chose to resign from teaching and come home to Henry County to farm. And he still is at the age of 78.

What I believe makes Berry so influential these days is that his voice calls people back to a simpler and more family-friendly/land-friendly life. Given the anti-family/land culture that we live in, his message has the persuasive power of a prophet, or that of a voice crying out from the wilderness. His prophetic role in *time* and *space* - time being our technological, post-agrarian age, and space being his farm in Henry County, Kentucky – has a way of wooing the postmodern imagination and exposing the existential ache within us all, an ache that longs for a weightier kind of existence.

Also, his depiction of the good life, which is based on spiritual wellbeing and not material possessions, awakens our given need for connection – that need for a meaningful interplay between the past, present and the future. Showing people this holistic picture of life has a way of provoking a conversion of sorts in his readers. Seeing the way things are and should be creates a longing for a better way of life, a life that is not necessarily “new” per se, but tried and true, and deeply rooted in the values of a simpler and more assuasive existence.

This is not to say Berry is a “prophet” in the biblical sense of the word. But he does possess sage-like qualities, for he certainly knows how to eulogize age-old wisdom. Human longings often ignored or created by the spirit of Progress surface as he talks about a vanished way of life. With resolute stories of land ownership, home and hearth, marriage and legacy, and clear devotion to one's particular place (all of which are core principles of New Agrarianism), Berry portrays a way of relating that is more human, meaningful, and realistic than the template offered by the postmodern version of Progress. His view of the good life is simple, sustainable, endearing, and more importantly, sympathetic to the concept of eternity etched within every human soul (Ecclesiastes 3).

So simply put, Berry's concept of oneness with God, mankind, and the created world is not a truth merely to be preached from Scripture on Sunday morning. It is not just an abstract idea dangling in midair, or orthodoxy without an orthopraxy. Oneness for Berry is a way of life to be pursued. Thus he implores readers to see that doctrinal commitment without compassion for rivers, trees, and the wildlife surrounding us is heresy.

Now this is not to say that Berry is without inconsistencies. For instance, in his writings, he at times fails to respect those whose genuine convictions differ from his, making the virtue of unity or oneness that he espouses a bit elusive. And at times his compelling expressions of love for one's place in creation is often made to look disingenuous when he shows no love for his enemy. And so we can say that Berry has much to learn from the church. But the same can be said for the church's need of Berry.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

So in the time remaining, I would like for us to consider the implications all of this has for those of us in the church. And I look forward to the discussion this might create. From its twentieth century beginnings, we have seen that the Agrarian Movement sought to reconcile modernity and tradition, progress and human nature. And at its core, there has been the desire to protect home-life, shelter and defend rural-life, and literally build a healthy culture from the ground up. And these concepts, I think we all would agree, are near and dear to the heart of God. They are Christian concepts.

But the question is this: where is the church in this battle of ideas? Could it be that the subtle forces of Progress are not only the key factor to the crisis in America, but also the reason for the troubles in the church? I believe so. And I'm not alone. In the last forty years a number of books have been written to help the church understand her plight. And it is worth noting that the good ones base their concerns on the teaching of the apostle Paul, when he wrote the following to the church in Rome: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (12:2).

Paul's words are hard hitting. They challenge us to be wise and circumspect. They call us to weigh the assumptions of our culture. And not only that, they demand courage; they demand fortitude, an inner steel that enables a person to stand for that which is "good and acceptable and perfect." And this "stand" typically takes place in the arena of choices. In his book, *No Place for Truth* (1993), David Wells says that we as Christians face a dazzling and dizzying array of choices. Technology is always being upgraded. Giant stores are full of every conceivable product. Vanity Fair is open 24 hours a day – and all of this is okay. But he warns that these stunning inventions come with a hidden cost. They tempt. They woo. And if we are not wise, we will incrementally give away our birthright, trade in our blessing, and lose sight of the tried and true ways for the immediate gratification of the stomach.

Presently, as I mentioned earlier, the Agrarian movement is thriving only in the margins. But this is changing. More and more pastors are tired of feeling like frenzied paramedics on a bloodstained battlefield. Bleeding wounds and casualties demand immediate care, but we are starting to question the fundamental nature of the war. We are starting to question the flock's core values, their cavalier approach to Darwinian innovation, and we are even questioning the fundamental aspects of what constitutes a good life. This soul searching is evident within many laypeople, too. Progressivism and the consumer template it creates, is proving to be a hollow existence. As one person put it, "Busyness is a great way to make money, but it's a lousy way to live." And I am hopeful, that as this inner frustration grows, more and more people will start rediscovering the tried and true values that create holy structure, restful rhythm, and deeper relations with the land and in the home and community.

By no means is the New Agrarian Project an end-all. It is a flawed and biased movement that will never claim victory on the battlefield of ideas. Alan Carlson in *The New Agrarian Mind* catalogs some of their mistakes. But nonetheless, it is fighting a good fight. It has something

to offer the Church in the twenty-first century because many of its core teachings are deeply in tune with the ethos of God's Word and our Lord's kindness in creation. In saying this, the words of Jeremiah come to mind. He writes: "Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls." (6:16).

I believe there is growing ache for wholeness and healing in our land. Christians are longing for more of Christ and heaven's earthly life. Many are wearied by the empty promises of the "next-best-thing" and pine for a simpler and more deliberate existence, one that can navigate the kingdom of technological power and still not lose its way. I would argue the Agrarian understanding of the good life is a good trail leader. Not all, but many within the movement stood at the crossroads Jeremiah describes. They caught a vision of the Garden City – that place where vitality and wholeness dwell, and they stepped out in faith, found their stride in the ancient path, and benefited greatly from its wisdom.

Yes, there will always be critics. The spirit of the age is bent on dismissing the path of truth, beauty, and goodness with a barb of cynicism. And skepticism is surely to found even within the church. It is popular now days to think that there are no models of a weightier and truer time and place in history. The conventional wisdom of Progress says each generation must "make its own path and leave a trail" (to paraphrase Emerson). But this is not exactly true to the Christian story.

Yes, on one level we can agree that the ancient path offered by Wisdom (Proverbs 3:13-20), will never lead to perfection this side of glory. The best application of truth will never return us to Eden. We will always carry with us into anything we do the weaknesses inherent in our sinful nature. We know this. That is why we are called pilgrims. And yet, this confession must be qualified with the admission that there are times in history when God's people, by God's grace, walked more circumspect with the Lord. Their imperfections, not their hope for perfection, convinced them to be more intentional, more thoughtful with their choices, and more serious in the way they approached the Scriptures. Thus their roots went deeper, their fruit tasted sweeter, and their legacy shines brighter.

This is helpful in my mind, because when the questions of Christian living are framed this way, the ancient path or the core values of biblical agrarianism are set free. You see it is in our nature to take a truth or principle and entomb it in a particular time or culture. For example, agrarianism is not synonymous with being a Palestinian Jew, though agrarianism was a big part of their worldview. To see the world through agrarian eyes doesn't mean you have to be Amish, Anabaptist, Reformed, or Rural, or a country Farmer. And it is not a way of life that woodenly rejects anything characterized as modern or post-modern. Rather, the point that I am making is this: It is a step of faith in the here and now. It is a Christian life characterized by deep humility and a sincere desire to reject any form of selfishness, any conceptual framework that subverts or restricts the *fullness* of life offered by Christ. Let me put it more optimistically and then I'll see if you have any thoughts.

The Bible teaches that God is the creator of all things. And it teaches that God has declared all things created good, especially you and me. Throughout the Bible we are told that we have a special relationship with God, though we are fallen, because we are made in His

image. And we are told that he has redeemed us from our sin through his Son so that we can be restored to Him and walk with him in the manner that he intended in the Garden. In part, that relationship, we are told, involved taking care of his good creation. And we learn in Genesis that this responsibility is not to be taken lightly.

Now we could spend a lot of time here discussing all the implications of what theologians call the Creation Mandate. But that is not where I'm going. Just simply think about the context of the mandate. Where did God put man and woman? He put them in a garden. He told them to look around and start feeling and thinking about the place he put them. This place is not arbitrary. This relationship between the land and Adam and Eve is not pragmatic or utilitarian in the mind of God. He put them in this relationship because they are human. The word human comes from the word "humus." We are from the earth. This is God's design.

And so what I'm getting at is this: This is an agrarian principle. God made us to be in a close relationship with his creation. He wants us to have a strong sense of identity when it comes to your location or place. Progress has plucked that beautiful reality away from us by making us think of the creation mandate as more narrow – "I'm an accountant, I create order in the area of numbers. And that's it. It matters not where I am from or where I am going." But that is a truncated view of life. And so what I'm getting at is this: As Christians we not only need to be willing to say "no" to any choice or structure or worldview that seeks to minimize or the beauty of our humanity, but more importantly, we need help walking the ancient path. We need help discerning where the good way is, if we desire to find peace for our souls. The agrarians are not perfect. But they are guides, nonetheless, and I commend them to you.

FORM WITHOUT FORMALITY (FOR DISCUSSION)

How does one adhere to *form and structure*, but not at the expense of Christian freedom? When God gives His people structure, it is for our happiness, holiness, and God's glory. This motivates us to embrace form and structure, and to pass it on to the next generation. But our sinful nature likes to war against the goodness of God. And when it goes unchecked, it creates a legalistic movement called Formalism.

An easy example of this is the Amish community. There are two kinds of Amish people: 1) Those who choose not to embrace the gadgets and innovations of modern technology in order to hold on to the innate blessings found in tradition, communal stability, and multi-generational living; 2) And those who choose to embrace the Form without any understanding of the blessings. This is the Pharisee within us. The Pharisees in Jesus' day kept the outward forms of Judaism but knew not the meaning. Thus they judged people based upon the adherence to form. That's one kind of tension that we feel when we talk about living a deliberate Christian life.

SIMPLICITY WITHOUT SEPARATISM (FOR DISCUSSION)

It will be *simple and pure* of heart, though the Mystic within would have us to retreat into our holy communes or private homes. Do you struggle to reach out to people and engage?