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A Christian Alternative to Land as a Commodity

by Duane Bajema
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The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with me.

Lev. 25:23

It is obvious that all of rural society is undergoing radical and rapid changes. The changes are in large part occurring with the introduction of new technology which is promoting an ever-increasing industrialization of agriculture.

There are many hazards and pitfalls that are becoming evident. Individual family farm units are decreasing. Capital requirements in farming operations are in-

creasing dramatically, and specialization seems to be the trend of the future. Use and misuse of chemicals, fertilizers, and pesticides are becoming prevalent, and agriculture is becoming less stable and less resilient, needing more government involvement and control as commodity prices move quickly and erratically.

The trends are therefore changing the social structure of rural America. Populations in small towns and rural areas are decreasing which in turn affects churches, schools, and community services. There are many other issues that can be presented, but,

I would like to focus on one issue which is at the heart of many of the changes that are occurring in rural America.

Agricultural land is of crucial concern to the well-being of society and to future generations. The land provides the base for the plants, the birds, the animals, and much of the beauty that we've learned to love. The thin top layer of soil supplies most of the

return on his investment. Because the owner seeks out someone who will give him the most rent money, the competition becomes keen. The renter would then have the pressure to farm the land largely to make a profit since he needs to pay the rent, cover his farming costs, and earn money for living. The emphasis therefore is not on husbanding the land, but on providing an economic

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food and fiber that sustains mankind. The loss of that thin layer of soil is increasingly causing more public concern. Losses of ten to twenty tons of soil per acre per year are all too common. Soil is being lost faster than it can be replaced by natural processes. Furthermore, the building of roads, houses, and industries is also removing prime agricultural land from production. Consequently, the base for producing food is being threatened in a slow, yet decisive way.

The capital intensiveness of agriculture has also influenced land. Land has been and continues to be viewed as a commodity. Land values are not based on their productive value, but are influenced more by what the speculative value might be. Therefore, we have many non-farm individuals who own land only for the purpose of maintaining financial security. Their major concern is to receive a fair return on what is considered the market value of their land. Therefore, when the land is rented to someone who will farm it, the owner's desire is to obtain a fair

gain. Long-term considerations frequently give way to short-term economic pressures to insure the safest economic return on the short term.

Our present approach to land use is based on the concept that land is a commodity which can be used by the owner and for the owner as he or she wishes, provided that the ownership does not violate any laws. Land can acquire or lose value subject to the many and varied influences society exerts as society changes. Land values have increased dramatically in the past, and this has resulted in many people becoming wealthy—wealthy not because their peculiar gifts and talents enabled individuals to farm stewardly, but rather, as many people would humanistically phrase it, "They happened to be in the right place at the right time." Conversely, a decline in land values has the opposite effect where equity is lost and the value of one's property and possessions declines due to outside pressures and influences which again are not related to the

capabilities of the individual. This is typified in farm foreclosures. People borrow money using the value of their land as collateral. As land values decline, so does the value of the collateral. When the value of the collateral is less than that of the loan, foreclosure results.

All of the agricultural sector suffers when these changes occur. These fluctuations affect other segments of society and are not peculiar to agriculture. However, these causes for instability should not be accepted as a part of life when they affect the very foundation of agriculture—the land. These trends should be of concern because they are likely to continue and will probably be accelerated with developing technology. The problem, however, is not technology. The problem is that technology is being used in a framework that perpetuates and speeds up the sinful weaknesses of that framework.

I contend that much of the instability finds its roots in a misunderstanding of the Biblical norms that guide us in our view of the land. Land is part of Creation. It is finite. Land is more than a means for making money. Land should be viewed as a base from which farmers are allowed to fulfill their calling to serve the Creator in nurturing components of the creation that are their responsibility.

Our present system does not encourage this approach. To the contrary, the present trends are moving to hide the true Biblical sense of a responsibility to God and to creation. Leviticus 25 teaches us that in the Year of Jubilee it was recognized that the children of Israel were given a piece of property to use and develop. But that the property was not a commodity that could be forever lost to another segment of society. I would argue that due to greed our Western society increasingly tends to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of fewer people. As this occurs, a framework develops that promotes injustice. This can be exemplified by what has occurred in Latin America and other parts of the world. There the power is in the hands of a small percentage of a population which maintains power and security through

land ownership and control. The result is that society becomes restless and unstable. Land is a base, a form of security. A landless society is a society without a sense of belonging. A landless society lacks resources to discover and develop. And our present system is moving us in this direction of greater instability and injustice.

However, the Old Testament gives us insight as to how human beings are to function in creation. Psalm 24:1 states:

The earth is the Lord's and all that it contains.

And Leviticus 25:23 states:

The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with me.

From such texts we can see that people are on this earth to care for it, to husband it, and to act as stewards of God's creation. A consideration of the Biblical norms raises questions about our present activities. What is occurring in agriculture causes many Christians to yearn for a means or a better way to carry out their calling and responsibility to care for God's creation. Present conditions in agriculture show that we are moving away from a stable, sustainable, God-glorifying agriculture. The result is that the Christian farmer is being bombarded by more and more humanistic influences that are becoming increasingly more difficult to identify and withstand. The Christian farmer knows he (or she) has a long term responsibility to care for all of creation, but the present framework is slowly taking away the opportunity for Christian farmers to act responsibly.

I want to propose an alternative because I feel we have to be thinking seriously about what we, as Christians in agriculture, should be considering. The alternative that I am proposing is more Biblical than our present

framework, although it has not been formalized in detail, it is being presented for discussion, refinement, and subsequent action.

Christians should have access to an alternative to the present system of buying and selling agricultural land as a commodity. The guiding norm is that the earth is the Lord's and all creation belongs to the Lord, and it is our privilege to serve, develop, and care for all of creation in such a way that God will be glorified. God has promised to bless us accordingly.

A structure that could promote change would focus on those presently engaged in agriculture. We begin there, attempting to

Creator which the farmer experienced working with creation, is being mocked by the humanistic view that relegates agriculture to an economic realm which is highly competitive and lacking in long-term thinking and planning. The time when land is to be transferred is the logical time to consider alternatives that may initiate a Christian approach to land and creation.

A person possessing land should consider this alternative method of transfer: that upon death the land be willed to a trust. The trust would be one that has been developed by Christians to promote and establish a Christian stewardship of agriculture which would perhaps ultimately guarantee a care

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develop a transition towards a structure that recognizes God's sovereignty and also recognizes our position of serving God and loving our fellowman.

All farmers face a dilemma of property and land transfer upon retirement or death. How are farmers to provide an opportunity for their descendents to continue farming? How are they to treat all their children justly, not showing favoritism? Perhaps many farmers have struggled all their lives to develop a Christian approach to agriculture. They may have dedicated their lives, successfully or unsuccessfully, to carrying out what they felt was Biblically correct. But the recent economic competitive factors are threatening what they have worked for. The dependency on, and fellowship with the

for the land. The trust would hold title to the property so that the land could not be sold.

The trust would become an organizational entity that would function with a governing board composed of Christians. A constitution and by-laws would be formulated firmly rooted in Christian principles for the improvement and care of creation.

The land would then be distributed in parcels to those who want to pursue their calling as farmers. Priority would be given to those who would be the direct heirs of the former owner. Title to the land would never be given to the farmer. Instead, the individual would lease the property, with the possibility of attaining a lifetime lease after one or two probationary periods. The person would then be evaluated as prescribed in

the constitution and bylaws. After successfully passing the probationary periods, the person could obtain the lifetime lease. This would provide security, using the term in a Biblical sense as set forth in Leviticus 25. The criteria for evaluation would be challenging but not impossible: the criteria would focus on Biblical stewardship and care for creation.

The security would be found in the freedom the farmer is given to try new ideas and practices that could have long-term benefits. The farmer would be released from the characteristic of present humanistically-oriented farming.

The trust should also provide a component that is crucial to the intent of the trust. The trust should require that the farmer pay a specified amount every year (let's call it a stewardship fee), to the trust. This could be similar to what some would now view as rent, but in actuality it would be very different. The stewardship fee would go back to the farm from which it came and would be used for land and farm stewardship. The details deserve more work and attention, but the concept is designed to care for the needs of the land and creation. This is crucial! The focus must be on developing and at the same time protecting creation from the sinful influences of this world. As the trust developed, more things could be explored. Soil conservation practices could be encouraged, wildlife areas could be designated, and parcels of land could be allowed to lie fallow.

This type of framework will not guarantee financial success. There could still be financial failure due to irresponsible farming. However, there could also be financial gain. The framework should not assume that everyone is equally gifted to be a farmer. Those differences should not be overlooked nor would they be in this arrangement. There is still the freedom, the encouragement, and the redeeming and stewarding of creation in the correct sense while still allowing one to be rewarded economically for his labors. If extremes and imbalances develop,

the trust could address those at times specified in the constitution and by-laws. The emphasis would be Biblically oriented due to the foundational design of the trust.

The alternative arrangement would take the focus away from acquiring land as a source of wealth. The incentive would be concern for the creation—which is the obligation of all Christians.

The concept of a trust has many implications from a Christian viewpoint. It would promote the Christian concept of community by its very existence. Problems could be addressed communally and an outreach could be developed that would be more in harmony with Biblical norms. Provisions can be attempted that would acknowledge the poor in a dignified manner. For example, the trust might require that a small percentage of the land be set aside for raising crops which social work agencies would use in assisting the poor of the area. New meaning could be given to the concept of tithing. One could come up with many other possible advantages of this proposed structure. But of course, no effort is without its shortcomings. To me, this concept has more potential for Christian development than our present system, and I personally feel that it is feasible. As with all earthly endeavors, sin becomes the scourge. However, I believe that the concept of a trust is possible and more Biblically sound than our present system. Therefore, I feel it should be pursued, discussed, and developed.

Our encouragement comes from where the Lord says, in Leviticus 26:3:

If you walk in my statutes and keep my commandments so as to carry them out, then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit. Indeed, your threshing will last for you until grape gathering, and grape gathering will last until sowing time. You will thus eat your food to the full and live securely in your land.