
Brandon Hoover
Sacred Sovereignty: Inheriting the Land through Meal Time Prayer
by Brandon Hoover

“Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.” (Gen. 2:15).

Mealtime prayer is a common time to pause and reflect on the blessings God has bestowed upon us, our families and loved ones. Throughout my childhood, prayer before meals was a habit on the rare occasion that we were all able to gather around the table. Visiting the homes of other families I was surprised at the variety of mealtime prayers, many of them repeated verbatim at each meal. I can still recall the prayer around one table expressing thanks in these words, “Bless us, Oh Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

As an adult my meal time prayers, which always end with the same few phrases of “Bless this food, the hands that prepared it, the people who do not have it, and the land that produced it,” are repetitive, which challenges me to consider if I am praying intentionally, or whether I have come to take the meaning of these words for granted. The fact that we pray acknowledges our thankful hearts, but do we fully grasp all of the work, till and the sacrifice of the land to put food on our tables? Meal time prayer is important because it is a time to recognize our humanity, God’s sovereignty, and our relationship to the earth.

Regardless of the location, culture or time period, eating has been and will continue to be central to daily living. From hunter-gatherer tribes to mass-produced fast food we have seen the impact of food on cultural and ecological systems. Quite simply, people need to eat. Population increase is inevitable, and with the rise of population comes a rise in food production. Unfortunately, our current system of food production in North America comes at high cost to the people, the land and the culture. This process of production reveals a land ethic that is based more on entitlement than righteous principles.

Land ethic is a term used to describe the dominant way a culture relates to the land on which it lives. While this term is rarely heard from the pulpit or the classroom, it is an imperative idea significantly influencing our spiritual and physical lives – both gifts of our Creator. According to Ellen Davis, professor of theology at Duke Divinity School, the dominant land ethic in North America is productionistic in nature. The chief goal of this land ethic is to produce as much as possible as cheaply as possible to keep supermarket prices down and food options high. In this system, short-term benefits and monetary concerns are most important while ecological, cultural and spiritual realities are disregarded (Davis, Scripture, Culture and Agriculture, p. 22).

The costs of this productionistic land ethic are innumerable and interwoven. Rising demands on food coupled with the loss of land have forced us to rely on larger farms producing more food per acre at an alarming and unsustainable rate. As a result, the soil on which we depend is threatened. Large agricultural machinery, lack of crop rotation or rest for fields, overproduction, and significant amounts of inorganic chemicals being dumped into the earth will have a drastically dire effect on food production. In a 2008 National Geographic article Charles Mann states, “By 2030, when today’s toddlers have toddlers of their own, 8.3 billion people will walk the earth; to feed them, farmers will have to grow almost 30 percent more grain than they do now.” More grain production will mean more unsustainable production. Agri-business continues to repeat a vicious cycle of pumping the soil with artificial nutrients that will only leave the land barren and uncared for. It is a land ethic based on possession and personal sovereignty.

Our Creator’s heart as revealed through scripture expresses a righteous and caring land ethic. Initially the book of Leviticus was written to give the Israelites a framework for the world and their role in it, thus it is littered with laws about proper care of the land and its people. For example, the land was not to be harvested to its corners so the “aliens” and the “needy” had food enough for themselves (Lev. 23, 22). The fields were to be given a respite every seventh year, and sold land was to be given back to the original inhabitants every fifty years (Lev. 25). In its context, these passages reveal that a right relationship with the earth meant a right relationship with God and a right relationship with one’s neighbor.

What then is at stake in modern North America, and how does prayer at meal time affect the health of our families, our neighbors and the earth? How can we live differently and make choices that exemplify the land ethic revealed in Scripture? One example of a community attempting this is the Grantham Community Garden at Messiah College. The garden was founded by Messiah students in the spring of 2006 to “promote real life concepts of sustainable agriculture.” The garden is a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) where community members buy “shares” and receive a portion of the weekly harvest. Currently two workers and hundreds of volunteer hours provide the necessary attention to keep the garden flourishing. With careful attention the garden grows a large harvest of produce including three varieties of tomatoes, two varieties of lettuce and cucumbers, kale, rhubarb, watermelons and onions, to name just a few. Small farming practices such as crop rotation and organic fertilization produce abundant harvest. It is the stark contrast to large corporate farming.

The students who devote time and energy to the Grantham Community Garden do so because of their Christian faith and belief in restoration, responsibility and ecological justice. The garden actualizes an ethic where food does not cost the land but gives back
to it, and where right relationship with each other, the Creator and the creation matters. Shareholders are blessed with the knowledge that their produce is from a local and sustainable source promoting Christian ideals of humility, cultivation and restoration.

With the right land ethic, meal time and meal time prayer can be transformational to our daily living. Prayer is transformed to connect us deeply with the earth, our own humanity, and the God who resides over, and loves it all.

The Grantham Community Garden is just one example of sustainable and restorative agriculture. CSAs are becoming more readily available and markets across the country are featuring locally grown produce. For more information, visit the following websites: www.messiah.edu/org/garden/; www.coopamerica.org; www.localharvest.org; www.restoringeden.org; www.organicgardening.org


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When It Comes to Caring for Creation, Ignorance Is Never Bliss
by Jeff Miller

“Ignorance is bliss.” It’s a well-known phrase, but one I never really understood at a deep level until recently. You see, when it came to taking care of the earth, I’ll admit it – I was ignorant. Caring for creation was simply not something I had really seriously considered. And from talking to others concerning this issue, I was not alone. In fact, for much of the last few decades, the church as a whole was ignorant as well.

But today, thankfully, more and more Jesus followers are waking up to the realization that how they care for the earth is not an elective for some Christians to choose but is part of the core curriculum. As I began to see these issues with new eyes I began asking the question, “Why? Why did I (and the church) miss this for so long?” The answer I found was that ignorance grows very well in a soil of poor theology and ultra-consumerism.

Growing up as a Christian kid in the 90s, I couldn’t help being influenced by a certain massively successful book series concerning the end times called Left Behind. And though I gave up on them after the first two books, the theology behind the stories still spoke loudly: one day God was going to burn and destroy the earth.

One of the many problems I find with this theology is that it inductively teaches us that caring for the earth is a low priority. If the earth is like a candy wrapper that is going to be thrown away then why should we be concerned with things like deforestation and pollution? Yet the Bible teaches not only that we are to be caretakers of what God created and labeled good (Gen. 2:15), but also that God is one day coming back to restore and dwell with us here on the earth (Acts 3:21, 1 Thes. 4:16-17).

Intertwined with this candy wrapper theology is our keen sense of entitlement, especially in the west. Too many people feel like God gave us the earth to use as we want and if that means destroying natural habitats to put up a Wal-Mart or pouring chemicals into our soil so we can get perfect produce when we want it, then so be it.

Furthering this outlook is ultra-consumerism. We are content to let the wheels of capitalism spin as long as we can get our fill of easily accessible and affordable stuff. Asking questions about how and where products were produced just muddies the water. It’s better not to know. It’s better to be ignorant. Because after all, “ignorance is bliss,” right?

And on one hand, this statement is true. Life was a lot easier before I thought about how my choices contributed to my role as a steward and care-taker of God’s creation. The problem is that is Jesus didn’t call us to a life of comfort, ease and worldly bliss. He calls us to continue his kingdom of heaven revolution by passionately bringing the love, beauty and justice of heaven down to earth. He calls us to see things with his eyes. When we do so we see that our ignorance comes at a cost. We see that there are consequences for living apart from the earth.

Author and speaker Brian McLaren speaks to this in his book, Everything Must Change, when he says, “Is there any point at which we need to say that we humans have gone too far, demanded too much, forced other creatures to sacrifice too much on our account? What justifies such an extravagant, ongoing indulgence of one self-centered species at the expense of God’s beautiful planet?”

These are powerful questions with which followers of Jesus need to wrestle. Here are a few guidelines I believe can be helpful.

**Embrace stewardship.** God has given me the responsibility to care for all the resources he has given me, including God’s creation, my time, my money and my relationships.

**Encourage sustainability.** To fuel our western consumer culture we have taken many shortcuts that have come at the expense of God’s creation. Soil damage, pollution and increasing carbon dioxide in the air have been the result. In response I want to promote practices that can be sustained over time without destroying God’s