Our Agricultural *Krísis*

Sketches of a Missional Response

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Abstract

In Australia, and indeed across the world, we are experiencing the effects of a broken food system, such that we face the possibility of a serious agricultural crisis. Current hopes for a resolution to this impending crisis are generally pinned to technology, despite the various problems associated with the use of agricultural technologies over recent decades. Such a situation demands a Christian missional response—an agriculturally-conscious missiology. This paper argues that farming and food production constitutes an aspect of Christian mission. The NT notion of *krísis* (judgment) is an as opportunity for repentance, applied to suggest that our agricultural crisis is a missional opportunity for the Church since it has spiritual, practical, and traditional resources necessary for a new agricultural paradigm. In light of these resources, the paper makes some provisional suggestions, directed at "consumers," related to three missiological categories: relationship, contextualization, and participation. Each contributes to a way of thinking that Ellen Davis has called "agrarianism."

Introduction

Wendell Berry, in his essay, "Nature as Measure," makes the following observation about the state of food production in the United States:

> For many years . . . we have asked our land only to produce, and we have asked our farmers only to produce. We have believed that this single economic standard not only guaranteed good performance but also preserved the ultimate truth and rightness of our aims We have bought unconditionally the economists' line that competition and innovation would solve all problems. . . . But the solution has been extravagant, thoughtless, and far too expensive. We have been winning, to our inestimable loss, a competition against our own land and our own people. At present, what we have to show for this "victory" is a surplus of food. But this is a surplus achieved by the ruin of its sources. (Berry 2009, 5)

Thirty years ago, pronouncements of such a pessimistic kind were unfashionable. They have, however, become more regular as the state of the global environment deteriorates more quickly than most could have imagined.

In the Central West of New South Wales, Australia, the eastern edge of which I call home, we have witnessed the severe effects of drought that continue to ravage the landscape. Drought has long been a feature of this land, but the effects of changing weather patterns have increased its regularity, duration, and severity. Our family knows multiple others within a fifteen-minute drive of our property that have been forced to either temporarily or permanently close their market gardens. Destocking has become commonplace. These losses of food production are a result of both mismanagement and environmental deterioration.

Such deterioration is widely, and rightly, associated with climate change, though this is only one aspect of the problem. Humans currently oversee such signs of the impending collapse of the worldwide food system as global soil degradation and topsoil loss, desertification of forests and farmland, heavier reliance on

genetically modified organisms and chemicals in agriculture, the reduction and loss of seed diversity,[1] catastrophic bee death (as well as ongoing losses of other important insects), the pollution and diminution of our water sources, and so forth.

Such effects are only a handful of those that could be named. We could, in addition, point to various ethical, economic, and geopolitical issues that stem from the social and ecological crises that, according to Ched Myers, have "been stalking human civilization for centuries, and [have] now arrived in the Anthropocene epoch" (Myers 2016, 2). My focus here, however, is on the possible impending *agricultural* crisis we face, though there will of course be overlap with other concerns. After all, those most likely to suffer the consequences of shortfalls in global food production and distribution will be the world's poor.[2]

Current hopes for a way beyond this impending crisis generally lie in technology. In 2016, *The Economist* published a piece pointing to the UN estimate that, by 2050, agricultural production will need to increase by 70 percent over 2009 levels in order to meet global demand. This is despite the fact that most arable land is already being farmed, while staple crops like rice and wheat have plateaued in terms of yields (Carr 2016). The solution? According to *The Economist*, the application of technology, including in forms such as "smart farms" and genomic tinkering, is vital. This hope, derived from our continued trust in the Enlightenment story of progress, ignores that the UN also reports that we currently lose or waste one-third of all produced food (Gustavsson et al. 2011). Further, crop yields have plateaued *despite* the application

1. USDA listings of seed varieties showed that between 1903 and 1983, 93 percent of all varieties had been lost (Fowler and Mooney 1990, 63–67).

2. Just in this decade, there have been at least two major famines in East Africa alone. The 2010–2012 famine on its own was responsible for up to 260,000 deaths. See Associated Press 2013; Checchi and Robinson 2013. The 2008 food crisis, in which wheat, corn, and rice prices spiked dramatically, led to millions of people being unable to access food, thirty riots across three continents, and seventy-six million people suffering from starvation. Some even argue that this was the precipitating event that sparked the Arab Spring (Cornford 2016a, 79).

of technologies such as synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and powered machinery. We have, in fact, worn out in a few generations land that took countless millennia to form. It is, of course, likely that technology will play a significant role in the future of agriculture. However, such a technocratic model as that espoused by *The Economist* would further subject global agriculture to control by large-scale agribusiness, and this is a questionable outcome given the track record of multinationals like Monsanto (see Robin 2009; Shiva 2016). Technology, moreover, is unlikely to alter destructive human attitudes to the natural world or the dislocated relationships between humanity and the rest of creation. Indeed, advanced technologies may exacerbate these disorders. As Patriarch Bartholomew has said, "What is asked of us is not greater technological skill but deeper repentance . . . which signifies fervent 'change of mind' and radical transformation of lifestyle" (Bartholomew I 2012, 171). In short: we need a new narrative.

The connections between this agricultural crisis and Christian mission are not obvious, at least within the realm of Evangelicalism in which I currently live and move and have my being. Some Evangelicals in Australia are more concerned to guard against what they call "green theology" than to develop a meaningful, gospel-centered response to the current crises we face (e.g., Monk 2018). For others, at least in my experience, food and agriculture are not concerns worthy of theological reflection. My task in this paper, therefore, is a provisional exploration of a largely untouched area of missiology. I will sketch a Christian missional response to our current agricultural moment, one that I hope is a small blessing to the Church and world.

I should be clear: though my family lives on a farm, we are not farmers. Our efforts since we set up our farm have been largely limited to subsistence, with only extremely small-scale forays into market production. In truth, most of our economic activity is best described as bartering. In short, I am not attempting to solve our global agricultural crisis; I am not remotely qualified for this task. I am simply offering a sketch of an agriculturally-conscious missiology, what could perhaps be called an earthy missional theology.

Farming and Food as Mission?

Given that I am no missiologist, and also the uncommon connection I am drawing between mission and farming and food, it is appropriate that I give a cursory account of my understanding of mission.

In the opening pages of *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch (2011, 1–11) makes several critical points that are pertinent to my present exploration of mission. First, Christian use of the language of "mission" is relatively recent. Second, "mission" prior to the sixteenth century described the Trinity, specifically the sending of the Son by the Father and the sending of the Spirit by the Father and the Son. Third, we should distinguish between *mission* and *missions* in order to differentiate between mission as a theological reality and missions as particular forms of participation in this reality. For Bosch, mission refers primarily to "the *missio Dei* (God's mission), that is, God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, and the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the Church and the world, and in which the Church is privileged to participate" (Bosch 2011, 10). A simpler way of putting this is that mission is, first and foremost, what God is doing.

I recognize that this way of describing mission could be deemed overly flippant. It is vulnerable to our tendency to retrospectively baptize our activities as divinely-willed. Who is to say what God is doing, anyhow? I am, however, also aware of the tendency to over-define mission. Indeed, Bosch notes: "Mission remains undefinable; it should never be incarcerated in the narrow confines of our own predilections" (2011, 9).

What, then, can we say about what it is that God is doing? The entirety of Scripture testifies that God's mission entails the self-revelation of God and God's ongoing redemptive activity in and for the whole of creation. From creation itself, to God's call of Abram; from the redemption and call of Israel to the Incarnation; from Christ's death and resurrection to the consummation of new

creation—God has been revealing Godself and working for the liberation of creation throughout the Scriptural narrative.

Soon after the inception of this narrative we encounter the primeval dislocation between humanity and God, self, others, and the rest of creation. This latter dislocation—between humanity and the rest of creation—takes numerous forms, as explored throughout Genesis. Among the most immediate effects, however, is that the ground is cursed, such that agricultural efforts—which up to that point in the story had been unnecessary—are disordered:

> Cursed is the ground because of you;
> in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
> and you shall eat the plants of the field.
> By the sweat of your face
> you shall eat bread
> until you return to the ground. (Gen 3:17–19)

Here Adam is condemned to a life of arduous agriculture, as opposed to hunter-gathering in God's abundant garden. Indeed, he will eat *bread*, which is not natural food (Howard-Brook 2010, 28). This is symbolic of the toil that will be required. In other words, Genesis 3:17–19 paints a picture of agriculture itself as a product of this original dislocation, an activity that is both absent and unnecessary in the era prior to this event. Agriculture is, after all, a human imposition on nature.

Though agriculture is absent in the period prior to dislocation, the vocation of the Adam had been "to work it [*ʿabad*] and keep it [šāmar]" (Gen 2:15), referring to the garden. There are at least two levels of meaning here: First, and most obviously, the human is to tend the soil in order to make it productive. Second, however, is the fact that these Hebrew terms are used to refer not to gardening, but to duties associated with the tabernacle (Num 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6). In other words, the Adam's work in Genesis 2 is liturgical in nature. Moreover, in Deuteronomy 5:12, "observe" [šāmar] is used to instruct the Israelites to keep or guard the sanctity of the Sabbath. T. D. Alexander comments: "In all likelihood, Adam was commissioned to keep or guard the garden so that it

would remain holy. This was a normal task associated with any sanctuary" (2008, 26). This suggests the Adam is appointed as a guardian of sacred space and not simply to be a gardener. There is a deep connection between the man and the garden: *adam*, the human, is formed by God out of the *adama* (the soil). In short, there is an interplay here between working the land and guarding its sanctity, both of which constitute part of humanity's vocation.

In addition to Adam's role, Ellen Davis points out that Genesis' first chapter is insistent on the place of seed and fruit in creation, and that God endowed creation with abundant fertility (Davis 2009, 42–66; see also Cornford 2016a, 82). Moreover, humans are created possessing dignity befitting those made in God's image, in contrast to the servitude implied in the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*. A necessary conclusion of witnessing God's love poured out into an abundant creation is that the exploitation of such creation must be rejected. Indeed, according to Davis (2009, 55), the "dominion" (*radah*) given to humanity in Genesis 1 should be more accurately thought of as "mastery among" as a master craftsperson "who works with reverence and respect for both his tools and materials" (Cornford 2016a, 82). In other words, God's apparent intent is that humans achieve a level of skill in understanding and stewarding creation, such that work can continue to occur that will further perfect what God has made. The stacking of this suggestion with the articulation of Adam's role to work and keep the garden in Genesis 2 suggests that, while agriculture may be an unnatural imposition on creation, there is meant to be a human agrarian presence in which creation is "mastered among" (not mastered over) for its good and the good of humanity.[3]

There is clearly a tension here in that Adam is appointed to care for the garden and steward creation, and yet agriculture is viewed as a curse. This is understandable in the historical context of the Ancient Near East given that agriculture represented

3. Bauckham suggests that humans "subduing" the earth is related to the command to fill the earth, and that only by agriculture were humans able to fill the earth. To subdue the earth, he says, is "to take possession and to work the soil in order to make it yield more food for humans than it would otherwise do" (2011, 226).

widespread oppression. People who settled in one location to farm became subject to both natural dangers (like disasters and shifts in weather) and human oppression (as city-based elites extracted their surplus production through the threat of violence). Agriculture made possible the existence of the city, a form of human organization to which Genesis is uniformly opposed, in part due to the oppression is represented (e.g., Gen 4:16–24; 11) (Howard-Brook 2010, 28; see also Lenski 1966, esp. 189–242).

Despite the portrayal of agriculture as a curse, biblically it is also something to be redeemed. In Torah, Israel is given specific commands regarding agriculture. Examples include:

- Restitution for land damaged by livestock (Exod 22:5)
- Allow the land to rest, according to Sabbath regulations (Exod 23:10–11; Lev 25:3–7, 11–12)
- Allow slaves and animals to rest, and to enjoy what they produce (Exod 23:12; Lev 25:4–7; Deut 5:14)

These commands deal with various agricultural issues including soil fertility, pest control, labor and animal ethics, crop rotation, overfarming, erosion and compaction. Such commands reflect God's care for the earth and concern that Israel's agricultural practices echo such care. The meaning of the story of the manna in the wilderness in Exodus 16 could be construed partly as an object lesson in how to do agriculture when the time eventually comes for Israel to transition into a settled existence—take only what you need, not too much and not too little (Myers 2001). This is revisited in Leviticus's commands to restrict production to certain years (Lev 25). In other words, human agriculture is not separate from creation, but exists within its limits.

It is also worth remembering that the land into which YHWH promised to bring Israel following its wilderness wandering is described according to its agricultural bounties:

> For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of

> wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing. (Deut 8:7–9a)

That God's mission might encompass the redemption of agriculture is also signalled in the OT's vision of future restoration:

> They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
> and their spears into pruning hooks . . .
> they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees. (Mic 4:3–4)

Micah's vision of an idealized future, like that found in Isaiah 65:17–25, is not devoid of agriculture. Rather it is characterized by each family having access to their own agricultural livelihood, unthreatened by external ambitions and environmental adversities. According to these prophets, this state of affairs is the will and doing of YHWH.

In sum, while the OT's witness on agriculture is mixed, it does tend toward redemption at the behest of YHWH. The *missio Dei* involves the redemption of farming.

The NT's witness is less explicit on the matter, given the latter Testament's generally parochial focus on local concerns in the burgeoning *ekklēsia*. Still, there are glimpses of agricultural redemption, or at least concern for agriculture and environment. The book of Revelation includes several descriptions of environmental devastations or "judgments" including fig trees dropping their winter fruit (6:13), the burning up of trees and grass and the poisoning of water (8:7–11), and the drying up of rivers (16:12).[4] Each judgement is the result of beastly imperial violence (Woodman 2011, 178–84). These are a form of *krísis*, which I will define and discuss shortly.

Jesus himself, in Luke 4:18–19, appeals to the Levitical agricultural laws when, channelling Isaiah, he declares his vocation to proclaim the Year of the Lord's favor—the Jubilee—in which the land is rested and returned to its original owners. These Levitical

4. I will have more to say about the category of "judgment" below.

laws remind us that if we live in the land in accordance with YHWH's commands relating to its limits, that land will yield its fruit and we will eat our fill and live securely. However, Leviticus 26 warns us that, whether because we give it respite or because it becomes desolate, the land will have its rest. I would suggest that such predicted outcomes do not require divine action. They are simply the natural consequences of human stewardship or spoiling of the land. Whatever the case, if Jesus' own vocation involves the proclamation of Jubilee—with all of its agricultural implications—we ought to consider the ways in which it figures into our understanding of Christian mission.

Agricultural *Krísis* as Missional Moment

I have described the impending agricultural moment as a crisis. By this I mean two things. First, I mean "crisis" in the conventional sense of the word: a time of danger, instability, or upheaval. I point this out not to be a harbinger of death, but to offer an interpretation of where our current practices have led us—and might lead us still.

Second, however, is the biblical sense of the word "crisis." When the NT speaks of *krísis*, it is usually translated "judgment." This is fitting, in that humanity is now experiencing the consequences of its actions and underlying worldview dating back to at least the industrial revolution. We must exercise more nuance than this, though, since if this is the sum total of "judgment," it is less than just. The global poor, those who have done the least to contribute to our environmental and agricultural crises, will bear the brunt of the effects of our sins.

While I cannot comprehensively deal with the topic of judgment in the NT in this paper, John's Gospel sketches a helpful way forward. In John 3, the Evangelist records the words of Jesus: "This is the judgment (*krísis*), that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed" (John 3:19–20). In other

words, for John, *krísis* is an opportunity. It is a point of decision. Will we come to the light, or will we hide away in the darkness, forbidding our deeds from being exposed by the light? Will we repent, or slink back into our evil until it catches up with us?

This is the moment we currently face—*krísis*. Indeed, Christians have much from which to repent. Wendell Berry pronounces that "the culpability of Christianity in the destruction of the natural world and the uselessness of Christianity in any effort to correct that destruction are now established clichés of the conservation movement" (1993, 93–94). Berry lambastes Christians for their complicity in the cultural destruction and economic exploitation of traditional cultures and of farmers, and for their indifference to the natural world's rape and plunder and the destruction wrought by industrial economics. He is also critical of the distinction between biblical instruction and the behavior of the supposedly biblically instructed. For Berry, even "respectable Christian behavior" is catastrophically detached from biblical instruction, and the survival of creation may well rely on the renewal of Christianity (1993, 95).

The tragedy is that Christians have a genuinely unique contribution to make with regard to agriculture, and environmentalism more generally. There is indeed a place for increased knowledge of and improved techniques for agriculture. But the heart of the matter lies not with these things.[5] What is much more pressing, and indeed prior to any particular practice, is a recovery of correct vision of and right relationship to the land. This means a correction of our failure to see the land truly as "good," and as a gift. As Pope Francis said in *Laudato si'*, "Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all" (2015, 76). This point is hardly novel, but to grasp its implications requires a complete overhaul of the lives

5. After all, increased knowledge and improved techniques are only as good as the people wielding them. There are a range of "organic" farming practices that may be applicable in a range of situations, but to discuss these in an abstract sense is pointless and, ironically, a failure to exercise the principles of environmental observation and contextualization that such practices require.

and relationships of basically every person living in the West amid late-capitalism. There is an opportunity for Christians to model to society what true life looks like, but this can only happen with the reorientation of our vision. Revival, after all, is not primarily about the conversion of the world, but about the revitalization of the Church. Such revitalization must include seeing the land as good, and truly seeking its good for the sake of our good. This is an "interior conversion" as "a loving awareness that we are not disconnected to the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion" (Francis 2015, 217, 220). This is a change that will require a reanimation of our imaginations, including theological.

For many Protestants, such a revolution of theological imagination must include a reorientation of our notions of salvation. Christ, after all, is reconciling *all things* to himself (Col 1:19–20; cf. Eph 1:9–10). There is no reason to think this does not include non-human creation. Such cosmic reconciliation is the mission of Christ—a mission on which we must be willing to embark. We are the present embodiment of the *shalōm* that God will eventually bestow on all creation.

Within my own Australian context, there is much that Christians can learn about this cosmic notion of salvation from our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, in particular those who have sought to construct a distinctly Australian Aboriginal theology. In their work *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, the Rainbow Spirit Elders outline a theology of land and reconciliation, beginning with the assertion that the Creator Spirit (God) camped among us in Jesus Christ, who suffered, died, and returned to life in our land, not only in an historical sense in Roman Palestine, but also as a living reality in the land (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 66). Christ, they argue, continues to suffer with the land in order to give new life (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 67). Such suffering of the land is that referred to in the NT (Rom 8:22), and Christ came to overcome the powers under which the suffering land is groaning—Christ not only suffers, but can overcome the evils which enslave the land (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 68). Moreover, through Christ, the land and the people are reconciled with the Creator Spirit, and with one

another. This latter process is something in which we are able to participate (Rainbow Spirit Elders 2007, 69–72). Finally, the Rainbow Spirit Elders rightly point out that for such reconciliation to occur, the Australian Church must acknowledge the crimes committed against Aboriginal people, their culture, and their land.

This is a rich theological sketch of various elements of reconciliation with the land. It makes clear, in light of Romans 8, that the land's liberation is an aspect of Christ's work, a suggestion in contrast to much Western soteriology, detached as it has been from land. The Rainbow Spirit Elders, and other Aboriginal leaders, are pointing to the *krísis* we currently face whereby we are being given the opportunity to readhere soteriology with the land.

For some, the connection of all of this—in particular, acknowledgement of past sins committed against Aboriginal peoples—with farming and food may be obscure. But the truth is that reconciliation with this land's First Peoples is a prerequisite for ending our agricultural crisis. We will never learn to see this land rightly—as a good gift—until we have come to terms with our sins against it and against those who cared for it for some sixty-five thousand years (Clarkson, 2017). Moreover, we deprive ourselves of the wisdom of hundreds of generations of proper management of this land for both its benefit and ours.

While I cannot claim the same wisdom as these elders, I can suggest various ways in which the Church can embody a more intentional and holy approach to mission as it regards farming and food. While I could speak about necessary forms of farming, such as organic farming or small-scale farming, or political realities such as food sovereignty and water management, these are hardly relevant to the daily life of the vast majority of Western Christians. Here I will point my suggestions not to farmers, but rather to those who rely on farmers. Such suggestions are not exhaustive, nor definitive, but are merely sketches of the *kind* of work that is both possible and necessary.

Getting Our House in Order

I have already suggested our current *krísis* demands we learn to see land rightly and recover a harmonious relationship with land. For so-called "consumers," this will take innumerable forms. It will begin not with particular actions, but with realigned desires. Indeed, our desire for more of everything has led to the wreckage of the earth's resources, including the sources of our food (more on this imminently). Consumerism is a spiritual disposition, one characterized by detachment from the material world (Cavanaugh 2008, 34–35). For this reason, our great challenge is to develop the spiritual discipline of relating to the material world (Cavanaugh 2008, 47). Our problem is not that we are too materialistic, but that we desire to transcend material constraints (Cavanaugh, 2011). We are not materialistic enough. We must become *more* materialistic, that is, healthily connected to the material world, even at the level of our desires. Consumerism does not arise randomly, but rather proceeds from our desires, as they have been trained in the industrial era. What is required is a realignment of our desires on a large scale.

The rich Christian history of reflection on desire bestows on us a unique and crucial message for the world. Such witness, particularly that present in the early centuries of the Church, also points us toward one inescapable conclusion: The Good is irresistible, and we only desire what is not the Good to the degree that we have been blinded to the truth regarding what is good. Augustine was correct when he famously commenced his *Confessions* by noting that our hearts are restless until they rest in God (Augustine 1997, 1.1), who is Goodness itself and the source of all that is good. Such rested hearts will see things in their proper place in relation to God and will thus have had their desires properly ordered.

One implication of all of this is that there is a connection between conversion—people coming to a knowledge of God in Christ and being initiated into the community Christ established—and the restoration of our agriculture. However, any evangelistic efforts on this front will be thwarted by the harsh truth that, on the whole,

Christians have little embodied witness to which they can point as good news. Most Christians do not have ordered desires when it comes to land, food, and consumption, let alone the practices necessary to offer an alternative to our current malaise.

We must, therefore, get our own house in order if we wish to be missional. This will mean more than buying organic food, or using an ethical shopping guide, or even attempting more ambitious goals such as the one-hundred-mile diet.[6] None of these things is wicked, but none necessarily challenges the economic conditions under which farmers toil and consumers consume.[7] Such economic conditions blind us from the reality of the food we eat by making it impossible to know the processes by which such food arrives at our table. Such veiling makes possible infinite configurations of the food market, such that even subversive movements—for example organic food—can be subsumed into a fundamentally destructive market system.

The Church's greatest witness will be to recover those elements of food production and eating that otherwise characterize Christian mission: relationship, contextuality, and participation. My suggestions here are by no means comprehensive, and in fact I am resistant to offering overly prescriptive solutions since they will not be born of the relational and contextual work that is necessary in each unique environment. Rather, these are merely sketches that illustrate the direction in which I think we must migrate. These sketches are intended to be seen in addition to other, more widely understood tasks of the Church, for example education, which will play a crucial role in awareness-raising and habit formation.

Relationship

The Church needs to recover the relationships necessary to embody an alternative to our current food economy. While deconstructing

6. In which a person seeks to procure only food produced within a one-hundred-mile radius of their home.

7. Though, of course, they can be exceedingly helpful in undermining pervasive economic habits if undertaken rightly.

this economy is a task of gargantuan proportions, beginning to enact an alternative need not be. The resources exist to connect with nearby farmers in order to purchase food from a known source, and to support local farmers who strive to enact a healthy and sustainable agriculture. Farmer's markets are one obvious example—indeed, an example that is trending upwards—even if my experience tells me they can become problematic when managed within a consumerist paradigm. Such local connections may lead to the achievement of the aims of the one-hundred-mile diet in such a way as to prioritize human connection rather than, say, environmental puritanicism.

The difference the Church can make beyond the individual eater is that it, as one of the last remaining major voluntary institutions in the West, can communally structure its purchasing and eating, including pooling money in order to support good farmers. This would no doubt be a radical proposal for some, since it requires Christians to surrender their own individual financial sovereignty, at least with regard to food. But can this can work? I have experimented, with reasonable success, with joint food purchasing on a smaller scale within the context of an intentional community in Sydney. New life was evident as people shared more meals together and embraced community to greater depth. Churches can generate lists of local producers and suppliers of sustainable goods, encouraging church members and the wider community to purchase from them.

I imagine that in some settings it is not outside the bounds of possibility for a regular church meal to become central to the life of a community, and to begin to shape the habits of that community. Earth Dinners, in which a festive gathering is held on Earth Day, represent one possible model whereby theory and practice converge.[8] Earth Dinners are relatively simple: you gather a group of people—whether family, friends, or the broader community—to share a dinner comprising food from local and sustainable sources, during which participants tell stories, discuss the food we

8. My gratitude goes to Michael Frost, my colleague at Morling College, for drawing my attention to this model.

eat, brainstorm ideas for how we can eat more sustainably, and celebrate the food the Earth provides. The timing of such an occasion could be reconfigured to align with an agricultural event, such as a local time of harvest, in order to better conform our rhythms to that of the environment.

Contextualization

Cavanaugh suggests that globalization, though it may have increased our awareness of and sympathy for other times and places, has nonetheless produced a detachment from all times and places (2008, 44). This is a profound observation, and demands our *re-place-ment*, our reconnection with this time and place *as a time and place*, not merely as the contingency in which we happen to exist.

Many churches are primed to be able to offer a local, contextual alternative for food production. Community gardens are rarely able to produce sufficient food to provide meaningfully for even a handful of people, but they can become a catalyst for neighborhood food production. Churches can often access unused space that can be converted into such gardens, whether on their own land, that of parishioners, or on land stewarded in agreement with local government. Perhaps churches could even reclaim curbsides though this may cross legal lines in some jurisdictions (or at least the limits of our willingness to contravene them). From a community garden, churches are able to welcome those from the wider community, learn from their experience, and pass on collective knowledge through all manner of gatherings. Again, I have experimented with this reasonably successfully in recent years, at least on a small scale with few resources.

Such possibilities remind me of monastic practices in the medieval period which, far from the Protestant mythology of monks "fleeing the world," sustained European memory and culture in a period of turmoil. As Kenneth Latourette notes, Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries involved themselves with, among other things, improving soil and agricultural methods. One example was

the Benedictine's pioneering use of marl (lime-rich mud). Hence the monasteries became centers of "orderly and settled life . . . pioneers in industry and commerce" (Latourette 1938, 379–80).

As with the Benedictines, the recovery and cultivation of agricultural knowledge in the cities will become increasingly important in our time as food prices likely rise in the future. Community gardens, and the innumerable home gardens they could spawn, could provide the material means to buffer cities against future crises and lay the groundwork for renewed relationships between churches and their local communities. They may also make us less reliant on large-scale, industrial agriculture and provide a meaningful alternative to it in the meantime. As Berry has argued, mastery of land can only happen on a certain scale, since mastery requires intimate knowledge (1977, 31). Churches can pioneer this kind of mastery born of contextualization and in opposition to those monocultural forms of agriculture born of industry.

Participation

I have already suggested that Christians and churches ought to participate in their own food production, whether through community or home gardens, and that they should participate in the relationships that make eating well a possibility. I would add that we can participate in political advocacy for the sake of our food systems. I would suggest that Christian voices have been largely non-existent on such issues. Some churches, such as the Uniting Church in Australia, have thankfully been outspoken about climate change. This is a significant agricultural issue, but there are more issues, and there is more at stake.

I would also suggest that Christians and churches can participate by reclaiming other areas of food production. As Jonathan Cornford notes, "Very few of us actually produce anything tangible and material, let alone produce things that serve our basic everyday needs" (2016b, 32). This is an opportunity. Even cooking one's own meals is a subversive act in our time when eating out is easier than ever, and cheap, poor-quality, environmentally-intensive,

pre-prepared meals are more common than ever. Even more subversive is the performance of this act in the context of community, whereby we have organized ourselves to cooperatively produce the things we need without the mediation of large-scale industrial processes or capitalist markets. More subversive still is the sheer pleasure of eating meals that we have prepared, especially those prepared from produce we ourselves have grown.

One possible starting point for this is the adoption of preparing food liturgically. It is worth noting that most Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper using food items that are produced in ways that are damaging to the environment, such as bread or crackers produced from grains grown in chemically-fertilized monocultures and packaged in unrecyclable material. The preparation of the Eucharistic elements using ingredients that are sustainably and ethically produced is a good starting point, just as the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the starting point for our life together and our mission of welcoming the world to the table of the Lord.

Conclusion

All I have said could be summarized by Ellen Davis who calls for "agrarianism"—"a way of thinking and ordering life in community that is based on the health of the land of living creatures" (2009, 1). My suggestions are sketches of a recovery of our connection to the rest of creation, our seeking after God (the Good) which orders our desires, genuine Christian community, and a holistic understanding of Christian mission.

While there can be a tendency toward forms of legalism in environmental circles, I certainly do not intend anything I have said to be understood as such. My aim for this paper is to inspire further conversation on a rarely explored but crucial topic. What I would want to assert is that the *krísis* we face is an opportunity in which we can choose to continue on our destructive path or choose the gift of life offered by the Redeemer. We should not seek to enact anything I have said out of a burdensome sense of obligation to a reduced way of life. We should rather seek to become the

kind of people who desire to recognize the gift of living simply and sustainably within nature's limits in communion with God, ourselves, others, and non-human creation. In offering a sketch, I hope that more detailed work might be done. To recall Augustine, it is in this place that our hearts will be at rest. It is also a timely way in which we may participate in the *missio Dei*.

Where better to conclude than with the following poetic reminder from our era's most profound agricultural prophet (Berry 2005, 18–19)?

> There are no unsacred places;
> there are only sacred places
> and desecrated places.

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