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A Plain Account of Daily Bread: Christian Perfection and the Politics of Food

It cannot be stressed enough how little the liberation dynamic has made an impact on the North American scene... We usually do not even understand the minimum that tough social analysis would compel us to acknowledge about our North American situation... [We begin with] what historically is mediated to us – a precious historical configuration of the lowly shape of Jesus' public ministry that offers us a new insight into reality. Here is the corporate selfhood that bends low toward each threatened creature, which at the same time erupts in opposing empire, the oppressive power that threatens human dignity and the dignity of every creature. So we raise the question time and time again: Is there sacred space in reality where we can rediscover the dynamics of this historical configuration? It is especially at the eucharist that this question arises most compellingly.¹

In the 20 years since Frederick Herzog's *God-Walk* challenged the North American theological community to wake up to the reality of empire and participate in re-orienting ecclesial life toward Jesus' contra-imperial praxis centered in the eucharist, much has been written about the significance of the church, the centrality of the eucharist, and the dynamics of American imperialism. Rarely have these respective emphases been held closely together, however, so that a kind of bifurcation is discernible within contemporary North American theology between those who, on the one hand, stress the counter-cultural nature of the church's eucharistic practice but evade the 'tough social analysis' which might illuminate the absolute dependence of everyday North American Christian life upon empire, and those who, on the other hand, critically address the all-pervading reach of the *imperium novum* but fail to press toward that 'sacred eucharistic space in reality' where God in Christ continues both to 'bend low toward each threatened creature' and 'erupt in opposing empire.' In close alignment with Herzog's project of fashioning a North American eucharistic theology of liberation, this essay will offer preparatory thoughts toward understanding the church's eucharistic meal as a holistic way-of-life-together which, in concrete opposition to the ways and means of the *Pax Americana*, is enfleshed in just and redemptive relationships with the world's

¹ Frederick Herzog, *God-Walk: Liberation Shaping Dogmatics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), pgs. 241-242.

exploited poor and the threatened creation. To do so, I will first relate the political nature of everyday eating in our imperial situation to the social location of worship in the earliest Christian communities, and then draw upon John Wesley's holistic understanding of Christian perfection, including his recovery of the agape meal, in proposing an expansion of eucharistic praxis to include substantial, everyday meals-together which subvert the imperial political economy presently governing contemporary existence *by* nourishing the formation of local, sustainable, and equitable economies that serve the flourishing of human and non-human life.

The Politics of Food

To fight against corporate chemical-industrial agriculture, against corporate control of the global food system, against corporate ownership of life, and against corporate control of economic decision making is the fight on this planet.²

One of the more insidious facets of the new American empire – constituted by the mutually reinforcing ties between U.S. corporate, political, and martial powers – is its expansive influence over the most mundane and intimate aspects of everyday life. Nowhere is this more evident than in the consumption of our ‘daily bread.’ From the beginnings of the Green Revolution in the mid-twentieth century to the most recent biotechnological ‘advances’ in agriculture, global food production has undergone an enormous shift from being grounded in local, co-operative, agrarian, and de-centralized communities to being dependent upon a centralized, state-subsidized, and increasingly small group of mega-corporations (i.e. Monsanto, Cargill, ADM) which control everything from seed to fertilizer and chemicals to water flows to the processing, packaging, marketing, and transport of food products. Viewed from a socio-analytical perspective, it is clear

² Dave Henson, ‘The End of Agribusiness: Dismantling the Mechanisms of Corporate Rule,’ in Andrew Kimbrell, ed., *The Fatal Harvest Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture* (Washington: Island Press, 2002), pg. 233.

that “food is everywhere political,” because, far from being a simple biological process or private affair, the act of eating is integrally bound up with “the big issues of twenty-first century politics.”³

From the start, one of industrial agriculture’s fundamental promises has been its claimed goal of ‘feeding the world’s hungry,’ with large-scale, monocultural, and techno-chemically intensive methods offered as the only way to nourish a growing global population. As agrarian activist Vandana Shiva argues, however, the main purveyors of the Green Revolution – private American Foundations like the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, the American Government, and non-democratic international organizations like the World Bank – were never principally motivated by the hope of eradicating global poverty but rather driven by the intent of defusing agrarian radicalism. As early as the 1940s, “it was recognized internationally that the peasantry were incipient revolutionaries.” As such, “rural development assisted by foreign capital was prescribed as a means of stabilizing the countryside.”⁴ It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the defining marks of modern industrial agriculture – reliance on outside capital, replacement of workers by machines, accumulation of debt, dispersion of rural communities, growth of urban centers – directly coincide with state and corporate control not only over the processes of food production but over social relations as well. As millions of independent farming families around the world have been uprooted from the land through ‘market forces,’ they have quickly become a class of urban poor whose only access to food is through the very market that undermined their once subsistent way of life. Moreover, with global corporations replacing local food crops with luxury cash-crops for export (i.e. flowers, sugarcane, cotton, eucalyptus), the displaced millions who are unable to secure even low-paying industrial jobs are simply left to starve. Far from serving the needs of the world’s poor, the

³ James L. and Melissa L. Caldwell, eds., *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), pgs. 3, 2.

⁴ Robert Anderson and Baker Morrison, *Science, Politics and the Agricultural Revolution in Asia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), pg. 7, quoted in Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books Ltd, 1991), pg. 51.

industrialization and internationalization of agriculture is actually “responsible for more hungry people than both cruel wars and unusual whims of nature” combined.⁵

Corporate agriculture’s exploitation of the natural world has been no less devastating. The Green Revolution’s primary strategy of increasing global food production through the utilization of costly technologies such as large-scale machinery, synthetic nitrogen fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides is a primary contributor to many of today’s ecological crises. Following World War II, the U.S. government’s enormous surplus of ammonium nitrate, which had been used to make explosives, was converted into chemical fertilizers which could be mass produced, sold to farmers, and spread across America’s farmland (and later shipped abroad). Likewise, many of the poison gases developed for the war were refashioned into pesticides and herbicides. Since it was no longer necessary for the fertility of the soil to be managed with small-scale techniques such as crop rotation, polyculture planting, and the use of natural, low-cost fertilizers (i.e. manure, nitrogen-fixing plants), the Green Revolution made possible the state-sanctioned transformation of small, independent family farms into a large, corporately-controlled industrial system, with fertilizer and pesticide inputs converted into commodity outputs of monocropped corn, wheat, soybeans, etc. – with the whole process entirely reliant upon the enormous use of non-renewable fossil fuels. Although they initially produce increased crop production, these ‘savior’ technologies, over the last half-century, have also been responsible for making almost one-third of the world’s once-farmable land unusable for growing food, for the poisoning of ground waters, rivers, and oceans, and for the massive loss of plant and animal biodiversity, while also contributing to global warming and sharp rises in health problems such as asthma, allergies, fibro-myalgia, and cancer in both farmers and consumers. At the same time as the global environmental movement is coming to identify industrial agriculture as the

⁵ Richard Barnet, *The Lean Years: Politics in the Age of Scarcity* (London: Abacus, 1980), pg. 171, quoted in Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), pg. 33.

largest single threat to the health of the planet, however, the imperial conglomerate of transnational agribusiness corporations, the U.S. government, and such unelected international bodies as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO are forcing its destructive technologies on the entire world. As Shiva makes clear:

The WTO's Agreement on Agriculture, which paved the way for the imposition of cash crops [in developing countries], should be called the Cargill Agreement [because] it was former Cargill vice president Dan Amstutz who drafted the original text of the agreement during the Uruguay Round. WTO's rules are not just about trade. They determine how food is produced, who controls food production. The primary aim of Cargill, and hence the Agreement on Agriculture, is to open Southern markets and convert peasant agriculture to corporate agriculture. But opening markets for Cargill implies the closure of livelihoods for farmers...Converting self-sufficient food economies into food-dependent economies is the Cargill vision and the WTO strategy. The Agreement on Agriculture...is a recipe for ecological destruction, devastation of family farms, and ruination of people's health.⁶

In the context of our present food economy, the simple act of eating industrially-produced food makes one complicit in the imperial exploitation of the world's poor and the threatened earth, because "unless we are willing to pay more for food, relinquish out-of-season produce, and rarely buy anything that comes in a package or is advertised on television, we support the current food system every time we eat a meal."⁷ For good or for ill, the eating of food *is* communion (1 Cor. 10:20-21), which is precisely why anti-globalization movements around the world are increasingly focusing on the growing and sharing of daily food as the foundational site of resistance to and liberation from imperial control.

The Early Church's Counter-Cultural Meal Praxis

*To take the Lord's Supper outside of its meal context, and perhaps also to take it out of the context of the Christian home, are hermeneutical moves the NT neither suggests nor endorses. Perhaps this is why the significance of the Lord's Supper has too often been...over-ritualized. To denude the ceremony of its social context leads to the distortion of its essential meaning and function.*⁸

⁶ Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, pg. 35.

⁷ Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pg. 374.

⁸ Ben Witherington III, "Making a Meal of It': The Lord's Supper in Its First-Century Social Setting," in Dale R. Stoffer, ed., *The Lord's Supper: Believers Church Perspectives* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), pg. 113.

As recent socio-historical work on the early church makes clear, a counter-cultural meal, set against the backdrop of an imperial power, lies at the very origins of Christian worship. According to Andrew McGowan, in his book *Ascetic Eucharists*, traditional accounts of eucharistic origins have often overlooked the socio-political significance of the early church's eating practices, primarily because of their reliance upon anachronistic distinctions between sacred and secular meals, thereby concealing the fact that the early church's eucharistic suppers were full, substantial meal gatherings and not simply symbolic rituals of eating and drinking. The modern differentiations between the religious and political realms simply didn't exist in the ancient world, with meals, in particular, functioning to establish the socio-religious boundaries, obligations, hierarchies, and/or commensal bonds at the heart of society. The proper distinctions, therefore, at least for the first few centuries of Christian existence, were not between sacred and secular but between competing socio-religious meal practices.⁹

In his book, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, social historian Dennis Smith describes the basic shape of a typical Greco-Roman banquet. Invitations (*kalein*, to invite) from the host were sent a few days prior to the banquet. As guests arrived for the evening meal, a servant lead them to the dining room where additional servants removed their shoes, washed their feet, and offered a basin of water for hand washing. The highest position at the table was given to the guest of honor, with the other diners placed according to rank to his right. According to Smith,

Individuals were to be judged as to their relative status according to their 'age,' 'political office,' or 'some other similar distinction'.... Such distinctions and honors were considered essential to the makeup of cultured society, and the banquet normally functioned within society to buttress its view of status.¹⁰

⁹ Andrew McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), see pgs. 1-31.

¹⁰ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium To Eucharist: The Banquet In The Early Christian World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), pg. 57.

After the first course, the servants again washed the hands of the guests, a libation of unmixed wine was offered to a deity (i.e. “To Zeus Savior”) and a hymn sung in honor of the god. The second part of the banquet, the symposium, involved continued drinking and some form of entertainment.¹¹

The gospel narratives, of course, are filled with accounts of Jesus’ distinctive meal practices. Interestingly enough, the word usually translated as ‘call’ – often used to indicate a ‘call’ to discipleship – is the word *kalein*, which ordinarily means to ‘invite’ someone to a meal. The Gospel of Luke recounts Jesus saying, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not *invite* your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors...But when you give a feast, *invite* (*kalei*) the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” (Lk. 14:12-13). In this sense, the ‘call’ to follow Jesus is an invitation to share in his particular form of table fellowship, one which begins not by the expected invitation of close friends and family or important members of the community but by the opening of one’s home and food to the poor, the vulnerable, and abandoned. Mark’s gospel recounts Jesus telling his disciples to beware of the ‘yeast of Herod’ (8:15), which means Jesus’ followers are to avoid the kind of imperialistic table practices through which the rulers of the nations, the mighty ones lord their authority over others (Mk. 10:42). Whereas the public officials like “to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets” (Mk. 12:38-39), Jesus’ disciples are instructed that “when you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor” but rather “go and sit in the lowest place” (Lk. 14:8-10). Precisely because seating arrangements were a universally recognized means of establishing status in the ancient world, Jesus’ reversal of where one ought to aspire to sit carried enormous socio-religious significance. Likewise, embedded in Jesus’ statement from Mark, “whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave (*diakonos*) of all” (Mk. 10:44) – with *diakonos* being a technical term for table service – was a complete overturning of the expected social hierarchies shaped around the meal table. In this case, not only

¹¹ *Ib.*, pgs. 20-33.

does Jesus warn against sitting too close to the guest of honor, but he insists that true discipleship entails taking upon oneself the role of the table servant – the one who greets the guests, walks them to the dining room, washes their feet, and serves the meal. “For who is greater, the one who reclines at table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Lk. 22:27).

Throughout the epistles, Paul’s theology of communal unity in the Body of Christ was offered not as spiritualized ideal but rather practical counsel given in order for Christians to experience and en flesh the counter-cultural grace of Christ in and through the community table. The ‘very truth of the gospel’ (Gal. 2:5), as Paul understood it, was at stake in the process of determining, for example, whether it was acceptable to eat ‘meat sacrificed to idols’ (1 Cor. 8, 10), whether Jewish Christians ought to eat with Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-14), or whether to affirm those who ‘eat only vegetables’ or those who ‘believe in eating anything’ (Rom. 14.2). To look at just one example, it is clear that the context out of which schismatic factions were dividing the church at Corinth were regular evening meals, since the phrases ‘when you come together as a church’ (11:17-18) and ‘when you come together to eat’ (11:20-21, 33) are used synonymously.¹² Smith points to the fact that such gatherings almost always took place in people’s houses and suggests that the shared meals would have been full-course dinners, followed by the participation of *all* members in offering their respective spiritual gifts as the evening’s ‘entertainment’ – “one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (1 Cor.14:26). What Paul describes in chapter 11 is a form of table fellowship in which some members were eating their own suppers while others had nothing. When you gather in such a way, Paul says, “it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper” (11:20). As Smith says, “eating was being conducted in such a way that it was being made a meal of individuals

¹² *Ib.*, pg. 176.

rather than a meal that enhanced community.”¹³ Paul insists that the Lord’s Supper takes place only when all of the members eat together, as one common body, in a justly shared meal.

Over three centuries later, at the Council of Hippo (393), the church ruled that:

Nothing more be offered in the sacraments of the body and blood of the Lord than he himself delivered, i.e. bread and wine mixed with water. First-fruits of honey or milk, which are accustomed to be offered on one most solemn day for the sacrament of the newly baptized, are to be offered at the altar none the less, but have their appropriate blessings however, that they may be distinguished from the sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord (*Brev. Hipp.* 23).¹⁴

By this point, the normative eucharistic practice of orthodox Christianity had clearly shifted from a substantial to a symbolic meal, set apart as a distinctly sacramental ritual distinguishable from an everyday meal gathering. McGowan links this transformation of the basic shape of Christian meal praxis to the emergence of “the great Church and of Christianity as a state religion-in-waiting,”¹⁵ since the eucharistic meals no longer explicitly enacted a counter-cultural alternative to the social practices of an imperial society. “In socially accommodating circles,” McGowan writes, “it was normal to mark particular times, places, and persons by the use of the same ascetic practices that were typical of the whole lives of radicals.”¹⁶ The transformation of the substantive meal practices of the early Christian communities into a highly stylized and ritualized event, therefore, marked a foundational change in the very nature, meaning, and expectations of Christian existence amidst the ways and means of an imperial society.

Feasts of Love

*Jesus, we thy promise claim, We are met in thy great name;
In the midst do thou appear, Manifest thy presence here!
Sanctify us, Lord, and bless! Breathe thy Spirit; give thy peace;
Thou thyself within us move, Make our feast a feast of love.*¹⁷

¹³ *Ib.*, pg. 192.

¹⁴ Quoted from McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists*, pg. 89.

¹⁵ *Ib.*, pg. 213.

¹⁶ *Ib.*, pg. 210.

¹⁷ Charles Wesley, *Hymns*, No. 506, stanza 2, *Works* VII.

Like many of the more counter-cultural ecclesial movements in Christian history (i.e. Monastic Communities, Beghards/Beguins, Mennonites, Radical Pietists, Bruderhof, Catholic Worker, Base Communities), the early Methodist movement attempted to recover something of the egalitarian spirit and shape of the early church's substantial meal praxis. Founder John Wesley, who looked to the first three centuries of Christianity as the model of 'genuine religion,' adopted the Moravian practice of 'agape meals,' first for those committed, mature Christians who met in bands and then for the whole society of Methodists.¹⁸ Describing this communal means of grace, Wesley said:

In order to increase in them a grateful sense of all his mercies, I desired that, one evening in a quarter...we might together 'eat bread,' as the ancient Christians did, 'with gladness and singleness of heart.' At these love-feasts (so we termed them, retaining the name, as well as the thing, which was in use from the beginning), our food is only a little plain cake and water. But we seldom return from them without being fed, not only with the 'food which perishes' but with 'that which endures to everlasting life.'¹⁹

A key element of the Methodist love feasts – reflective of the kind of free-form worship style of the Corinthian church – was the upbuilding of the gathered community through the active participation and sharing of all its members. "The very design of a love-feast," Wesley wrote, "is a free and familiar conversation in which every man, yea, and woman has liberty to speak whatever may be to the glory of God."²⁰ It is this aspect, no doubt, that led one interpreter of early Methodism to describe the love feast as 'a domesticated, democratized folk sacrament.'²¹

Within the broader framework of Wesley's praxis-oriented theology, the agape meal was a concrete manifestation of a holistic understanding of Christian perfection in love. Unlike the Calvinists of his day, who emphasized the utter depravity of fallen humanity, Wesley believed that

¹⁸ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), pg. 210.

¹⁹ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists, Works* (Jackson) VIII.

²⁰ *Journal* (19 July 1761), *Works* XXI.

²¹ Quoted in Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), pg. 411.

the pardoning grace of Jesus Christ has already partially restored the sin-corrupted faculties of every human being. And because he taught that God's work of salvation is not solely the "going to heaven" or the "soul's going to paradise" but rather already "a present thing, a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of,"²² Wesley insisted that when we actively respond to God's pardoning overtures, not only are we justified by faith but we are progressively sanctified in love. Moreover, Wesley affirmed, unlike Luther, that such holiness is not simply imputed to the believer but is inherently realized in his or her entire person, to the extent that the life of a true Christian can be recognized by visible and outward works of love, precisely because God's grace is at work restoring not only the inner soul but the body and all its activities.

We are, doubtless, 'justified by faith'. This is the corner-stone of the whole Christian building. But [works] are an immediate fruit of that faith whereby we are justified. So that if good works do not follow our faith, even all inward and outward holiness, it is plain our faith is nothing worth; we are yet in our sins.²³

Much like the monastic, pietist, and radical puritan traditions from which he drew, Wesley insisted that holiness of 'heart and life' extends to *every* aspect of daily life, including the use of one's time, money, and household goods and the nature of one's relationships with humans, animals, and the natural world.²⁴ The holy life, according to Wesley, or the life of Christian perfection, is a life lived in loving relationship with the whole of God's creation, with particular attention paid to the poor and vulnerable. For example, in the well-known sermon, "The Use of Money," Wesley's first instruction to 'earn all you can' is qualified by the provision that "we ought not to gain money at the expense of life," which he specifies as any work which is harmful to one's body or mind (i.e. working around arsenic, engaging in 'sinful trade') or is hurtful to another (i.e. land enclosures, usury, the production of unhealthy goods).²⁵ The second instruction, to 'save all you can,' includes

²² *The Scripture Way of Salvation* I.1, *Works* II.

²³ *The Law Established through Faith, Discourse I* II.6, *Works* II.

²⁴ For Wesley's concern for the whole of creation, see *The General Deliverance*, *Works* II.

²⁵ *The Use of Money* I.1-8, *Works* II.

wasting no part of one's resources "in curiously adorning your houses in superfluous or expensive furniture; in costly pictures, painting, gilding, books; in elegant (rather than useful) gardens," because all wealth beyond what is necessary for sustaining one's life and the life of one's family belongs to the poor.²⁶ Finally, after earning and saving all you can, the Methodist ought to 'give all you can' for the good of those who suffer in need.

In the hands of his children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked. It gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of an husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless; we may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain.²⁷

The 'scriptural holiness' which Wesley hoped would spread across the land, therefore, was by no means limited to a strictly inward sanctity but involved the 'going on to perfection' in relation to such things as daily work, material possessions, and the use of resources.

It is essential to stress, of course, that Wesley did not view the maturing in love in 'all our thoughts and words and actions' in an individualistic manner. For Wesley, there *is* "no holiness but social holiness,"²⁸ first, because the Christian life is wholly dependent upon the grace of God received in and through the preaching, teaching, encouragement, and accountability provided by the ecclesial community, and second, because the goal of Christian living is to be perfectly related to God, neighbor, and the whole of creation – in love. In other words, Wesley believed that both the means and the end of the Christian life are communal. The ecclesial structures of the early Methodist movement, including the conferences, societies, class meetings, and bands, should be viewed in this way – as both the means of receiving the relational love of God and the actual manifestation of spiritual (i.e. loving) community in this life. Ultimately, Wesley's broadest vision for the Methodist movement, never fully realized, was that of an interconnected network of small

²⁶ *Ib.* II.1-8.

²⁷ *Ib.* 2.

²⁸ *Hymns and Sacred Poems, Works* (Jackson) XIV.

communities that were linked to the church universal and that shared in the kind of co-operative, communal living reflected of the book of Acts.

The natural, necessary consequence of this will be the same as it was in the beginning of the Christian Church: ‘None of them will say, that aught of the things which he possesses is his own; but they will have all things common. Neither will there be any among them that want: For as many as are possessed of lands or houses will sell them; and distribution will be made to every man, according as he has need.’²⁹

In the most comprehensive sense, then, the Wesleyan love feast can be viewed as the culminating manifestation of an everyday Christian life-together that seeks to love God, neighbor, and the whole of creation in and through “all our inward and outward motions, all our thoughts and words and actions.”³⁰

Toward A Holistic Eucharistic Meal Praxis

*Especially we Christians on these shores will need to remember that our personhood, in its core, our character, has been forged by conquest... Our character has been shaped by exploitation... There is an absolutely breathtaking challenge involved here for the church in the First World... The ‘solutions’ to such vast socioanthropological dilemmas, as John Wesley rightly sensed, can never come in sheer theory, but will come only, if at all, in bands and groups of people who communally seek to embody a new way of life.*³¹

In the context of a global way-of-life-together which binds us to the poisoning of soils and the unjust displacement of peasant farmers through the foods we eat, what would it mean for North American Christians today to strive, with Wesley, toward ecclesial communions “called ‘holy’ because [they are] holy” and “because every member thereof is holy,”³² especially as true holiness encompasses an agapic way of life in ‘all our thoughts and words and actions’? The exploratory proposal this essay is offering is focused on recovering – for our time – something like the contra-imperial meal practices of the early church. Building on Wesley’s holistic understanding of Christian perfection, one can imagine the expansion of North American Protestant eucharistic praxis to

²⁹ ‘The General Spread of the Gospel,’ *Works* VI.

³⁰ ‘Of the Church II,’ *Works* II.

³¹ Frederick Herzog, ‘Full Communion Training,’ in Joerg Rieger, *Theology From The Belly of The Whale* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1999), pgs. 282-283.

³² ‘Of the Church II,’ *Works* II.

include substantial, everyday meals-together that depend upon and support local, sustainable, and equitable political economies that seek to serve the flourishing of all created life. In fact, precisely because the bodily-material lives of North Americans – centered in what and how they eat – are so intimately complicit in imperial exploitation, the liberation of the North American church and its members to serve God’s redemptive *oikonomia* in the world may very well depend upon the willingness of our churches both to examine – with a Wesleyan eye toward detail – the economic, political, and environmental implications of our everyday lifestyles and to commit to promoting political economies that foster rather than damage ecosystems, support rather than exploit workers, up-build rather than destroy human relations and communities, etc.

In this regard, the numerous agrarian movements that have arisen in the last few decades around the world (i.e., Landless Worker Movement in Brazil, Vandana Shiva’s Navdanya Movement in India, Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement in Africa, the Local, Organic Community-Supported Farming Movement in the U.S.) provide a particularly relevant and helpful resource for the North American church. Like Wesley, contemporary agrarian activists-thinkers affirm an extensive yet mundane understanding of the charitable life. Central to the work of agrarian writer Wendell Berry, for example, is the salvific concept of health, which, as he shows, is related to a family of words such as heal, whole, wholesome, hale, hallow, and *holy*. “If the body is healthy, it is whole,”³³ he says, and yet, precisely because our bodies are not distinct from the bodies of other people, of plants and animals, and of the earth – “for all creatures are parts of a whole upon which each is dependent”³⁴ – it is necessarily the case that individual bodies cannot be whole alone. To be healed (made holy), he says in overtly eucharistic tones, “we must come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation.”³⁵ What the agrarian perspective makes clear is that such *theological* tasks as

³³ Berry, *The Unsettling of America Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), pg. 103.

³⁴ Berry, *The Gift of Good Land* (San Francisco, North Point Press, 1981), pg. 273.

³⁵ *Unsettling*, 103-4.

examining the church's worship of Jesus Christ in the eucharistic meal or clarifying the meaning of holiness requires, in our context, attending to such *agricultural* and *ecological* issues as soil erosion, poisoned ground waters, loss of biodiversity, etc. and such *political* and *economic* issues as subsidies for agribusiness giants like Monsanto and Cargill, free trade agreements which make it illegal for small farmers to save seeds from year to year, enclosures of public lands to private corporations, etc.

At the same time, if the Christian life in our time and place is to involve more than the activism of isolated Christians or individual attempts at holy living, the Protestant church in North America will need to explore ways of embodying in its own political-economic life a more holistic, sustainable, and equitable way-of-life-together. Here again, the North American church might look to the agrarian alternative to industrial economies, with its practical proposals to re-connect daily human life with the rhythms of local ecosystems, to re-develop local economies in which producers and consumers are communally related, and to learn from nature standards for work and production by embracing organic husbandry, responsible energy use, and small-scale technologies. To give one example, Vandana Shiva's Navdanya (nine-crops) movement in India, which is modeled on Gandhi's non-violent struggle against the British empire, is an interconnected network of local farming communities which have rebuilt India's devastated rural economies at every level of production, processing, and distribution. By replacing chemically-intensive, large-scale, monocultural farming that is dependent on corporately-sold genetically modified seeds with small-scale, organic, and bio-diverse farming that (illegally) practices seed saving and seed sharing, while also promoting fair trade and co-operative economic activities, Navdanya is restoring health to local farmers, ecosystems, and communities. According to Shiva,

As Gandhi showed in his life...small-scale responses become necessary in periods of dictatorship and totalitarian rule because large-scale structures and processes are controlled by the dominant power. The small becomes powerful in rebuilding living cultures and living democracies because small victories can be claimed by millions... Gandhi did not bring the British Empire down with cannons or armies that matched those of the imperial forces. He brought down the empire with a pinch of salt and a

spinning wheel...As he said, 'Anything that millions can do together, becomes charged with power'...For us our seeds, our rivers, our daily food are sites for reclaiming our economic, political, and cultural freedoms because these are the very sites of the expanding corporate empire over life.³⁶

As this essay has tried to suggest, an interconnected network of communities seeking to resist an imperial power in and through 'justice meals' ought not to be an unfamiliar way of life to the Christian church.

³⁶ *Earth Democracy*, pg. 183.