

Berry, Wendell. *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1993. 177 pp. \$12.95.

### **Introduction**

Wendell Berry is a farmer, educated in the halls of academia but clearly more enlightened by the fading light of autumn's harvest than the than the fluorescent glow of the post-modern university classroom. He resides in rural Kentucky and writes with a fresh perspective that challenges the trends of culture and technology. He loves the land, his community of tobacco farmers, family values, and anything that will promote and protect real relationships among unique communities dispersed throughout this country and beyond. He opposes technology that isolates people, big business that overruns small towns, and the ubiquitous effect transportation and information superhighways have on diversified communities.

He opens his book with a jab at the techno-utopian world we live in and says don't but it. "This is a book about sales resistance" (xi). In all eight of his essays, he speaks with a clarity and a perspective uncommon in our consumeristic and over indulgent age, and his words challenged me in a number of ways. Let me consider just two of the reflections that resulted from his essays—the absolute necessity for local ministry and the prerequisite of complementarity that is inherently necessary in a local economy.

### **Local Ministry**

In his second essay, "Out Of Your Car, Off Your Horse," Berry lists "Twenty-seven Propositions About Global Thinking and the Sustainability of Cities" (19). He says, "Global

thinking is not possible. Those who have ‘thought globally’...have done so by means of simplification too extreme and oppressive to merit the name of thought. Global thinkers have been and will be dangerous people” (19). He follows this introductory assertion with a myriad of arguments for the necessity of living and thinking locally. In a world where Elizabethtown, Kentucky and Cairo, Egypt are united by fiber-optic connections, this kind of critique is very valuable for the *local* pastor.

The ministry of the gospel is to reach all the nations, but each pastor is assigned to a local assembly (cf. Titus 1:5)—at least if you hold to a particularly Baptist understanding of polity and congregational authority. So as I reflected on this essay, it challenged me to be more concerned about the local church and the proximal ministry that pastor-shepherds must engage. Berry, in his twenty-fifth point, says, “When I think of the kind of worker the job requires, I think of Dorothy Day,... a person willing to go down and down into the daunting, humbling, almost hopeless *local* presence of the problem—to face the great problem one small life at a time [emphasis mine]” (25). His point is very poignant when applied to pastors in the twenty-first century.

How many aspiring ministers of the gospel have been affected by the Christian stardom that has arisen in post-WWII America— men who preach on the circuit, megachurch pastors who write best-selling books, erudite scholars who furnish our libraries with helpful commentaries, and witty theological poets and pastoral misfits who produce daily internet manna. This universal appeal diminishes local ministry. Far from the days of Richard Baxter and his local visitations, pastors are challenged to keep up a world of “successful” ministry. Berry aptly challenges pastors to be willing to go into a local community, embrace obscurity, and die an unnoticed death, giving all the energies of their short lives to the growth and nourishment

of those around them. Such a challenge is very compelling and very counter-cultural, even in a Christian context.

How many pastors preach with an eye over their shoulder looking for the nod of convention approval? How many spend more time on their blog than they do on their Sunday School lesson? How many when pressed would rather conference with like-minded pastors rather than lead another weekend community outreach? The difficulty for pastors is that while the universal world beckons and woos us to delve into external affairs, the shepherd's work is hopelessly (and hopefully) local. God has called us to tend the sheep in our fold, those in our proximal reach. As Hebrews 13:17 instructs pastors, "they are keeping watch over [their congregations] souls, as those who will have to give an account." The pastor's task is local with worldwide implications, not global with local impediments. In a Christian world where many congregants know more about the lives of TBN personalities than other local church members, this emphasis can easily be missed. May we hear Berry's message and apply it accordingly.

### **Complementarity is Necessary for Local Economies**

Wendell Berry's fifth essay, "The Problem of Tobacco," promotes not only the legitimacy of the tobacco trade, but also the "Tobacco Program," and the local food economy. It is this final entity that I would like to address. Berry says in the voice of a fictitious conversation partner, "You are still clinging to the idea of an agricultural economy of diversified small farms that produce for local markets and local consumers." And he responds, "Yes, I'm still clinging to it... I want them to have, as dependably as possible, a local supply of good food" (64). Such a vision has shrunk and is yet shrinking in this country, as he admits, "the idea of local food economies, or 'local food self-sufficiency,' has few advocates" (65); but undaunted, Berry makes his case for the value and benefit of such an arrangement. It would benefit the land (64), the

farmers tilling the soil, and the consumers purchasing the produce. “A local food economy, in short, implies higher prices for farmers and lower costs to consumers” (67). Yet, such a notion presupposes a willingness to accept divergent gender roles. In short, it requires a complementarian society. Let me explain.

In our modern society, conveniences such as the drive-thru window, the microwave, and the supermarket are not just luxuries, they are necessities. The pace of life for most modern families is so fast that services like dry cleaners, delivery pizza, and overnight mail are essential for getting through life. Consequently, the pace of life is too fast for such local economies. Unless there is a division of labor in the home that says that the man will go into the world to make a living and provide for mother and child, while the wife sees her task of homemaking a valuable asset for the home economics of the nuclear family. This is the argument made in *The Natural Family*, and this is the underlying prerequisite for Berry’s local economy.

Only in places where the husband works to provide for the family and the wife/mother actively visits the “farmer’s market” returning home with the days goods, can such a local economy succeed. For in this vision of economy and community, the wife would have to go to the market for vegetables, the butcher for meat, and the dairy farm for milk and eggs. Moreover, these activities would have to be revisited more than just once a week. This kind of home economy and industry requires planning, time, and energy. Such resources are unavailable to the family that has two working adults. Thus, Berry’s vision depends on gender roles and diversified functions in the home. While his essays do not seem to oppose this, he does not explicitly make this connection.

Such an arrangement is scoffed at by the world, but should be happily embraced by the Christian church. It puts wheels on the carriage of biblical complementarity. It suggests

ways in which, the home could and should function as a dually-designed unit—the husband leading, working, providing, protecting and the wife following, helping, caring, nurturing. Berry's is a model for the modern-day Proverbs 31 woman who goes out to market and wisely procures goods for the sake of her family. So it should be in our Christian homes that wives should be masters of home economics. This is a counter-cultural practice, but one that adheres to the biblical model and one that promotes the original design of man and woman in the garden. This is far from the caricature that egalitarians present that women are to stay at home barefoot, pregnant, and totally inactive. The opposite is absolutely the case. Women who stay at home have the potential to do great things as they care for their children and prepare a home that is functional and fruitful.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, Berry's book is a helpful antidote to the commercialized world in which we live where advertisements, media, and entertainment lure us to have more. This wise farmer says that what we need are deeper, longer lasting, more significant relationships—with the land, with each other, and with the Creator of us all. Such counsel is helpful, but still insufficient. For even his utopian vision lacks any final resolution. His essays merely point to something better. They awaken a thirst for something more, and they point to a greater reality—the New Heavens and the New Earth. Such a garden-city is what he desires, yet such a promise is only extended to those who are united to Christ. Whether he sees that or not, I do not know.

Nevertheless, Berry's book heightens our imaginations to think of what the New Jerusalem must be like. Berry's words are prophetic, and worthy of consideration; still the words of Christ are even more hope-giving. For he alone is the one who is now preparing a place for us. He is the architect and builder of the city that is to come—a city that will not be

plagued by urban sprawl, endless Big Box stores, or pockets of masked poverty. The city that Jesus is crafting is the perfect one that will be the eternal dwelling place of God and man. Whether he knows it or not, Berry's book points us to that reality. May we hear his words and keep on running until we collapse on the golden streets of the New Jerusalem. May we be united to Christ, a shepherd and a gardener who longs to taste of the vine in the bucolic kingdom with all who trust in him.