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Produce and Provision: Agrarian Revivalism among Protestants in the South

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Abstract

This paper will analyze the popularization of garden and farming projects in the American South and their affiliation with Protestantism. It defines agrarianism as a lifestyle which emphasizes mindfulness, sustainability, health, value, and human interaction as they pertain to agriculture. Agrarianism and Protestantism exhibit a symbiotic relationship which affects the future of both traditions. This relationship is expressed through religious understandings about the theology of food and the generation of community as they appear within farming and gardening. This paper utilizes testimonials and comments from farmers, ministers, and congregants participating in agrarian-minded Protestantism within the southern United States. By compiling oral interviews, this study will also provide an ethnographic analysis of the practical application and identity of Protestant agrarianism. This paper asserts that the recent emergence of religiously affiliated farming and gardening projects constitutes an agrarian revival that informs the future of agriculture and American Protestantism.

"To eat is to see, smell, touch, and taste God's provisioning care."[1]

1. Introduction

The idea grew, as others before it, in a garden, in numerous gardens actually, but among sun and soil all the same. As I spent the summer sitting in church offices outside busy budding metropolises, at kitchen tables and front porches surrounded by family farms, in the back of a sleeping sanctuary, on the edge of a city nursing its identity as both environmental and urban, and certainly within the gardens themselves, the stories started to spread out and become the reality that for some Protestants, G-d is still a gardener. Within Protestant agrarianism, the earth is ripe with agricultural possibilities, and those possibilities are both an invitation to participate with G-d in creation, and a responsibility to other created beings. "There is this innate thing about people needing to be involved in creation...and in some sense they're not even consciously processing it," says Clay[2], an organic farmer and former minister. In reaction to that idea Protestants are reordering their communities around what it means to be "involved in creation," resulting in an agrarian revival.

Agrarian revivalism is the emerging return to agricultural practices and attitudes that emphasize mindfulness as a lifestyle that values land, food, farmers, and community as an extension of Protestant religious identity and theology. It differs from agricultural movements of the past because it emphasizes G-d as an active participant in social reform through produce, which is perceived as provision for the relationships between people, G-d, the earth, their own bodies, and their communities. It seems irrefutably true among Protestant agrarians that working with and within the land is a profoundly religious matter. Shelly, the pastor of a small Methodist congregation explains, "it is a spiritual experience to put your fingers in dirt."[3] Her comments mimic those of Barbara Kingsolver who contends that, "the decision to attend to the health of one's habitat and food chain is a spiritual choice."[4] She arrives at this conclusion by stating that agrarianism "is about understanding that every one of us, at the level of our cells and respiration, lives in the country and is thus obliged to be mindful of the distance between ourselves and our

sustenance."[5] Kingsolver decisively defines what so many ministers, farmers, congregants, and authors explained to me over the course of the summer; food is a human equalizer, and the growth of garden projects, farming experiments, food theologies, and community outreach programs is not a series of coincidences. Thus, this paper argues that the recent emergence of garden and farming projects among Protestants in the southeastern United States constitutes a conscious, agrarian revival which emphasizes the role of food, the cultivation of community, and the development of an environmental theology that is affecting the future of American Protestantism.

2. Frameworks

Protestant agrarianism is a burgeoning field within Religious Studies. In truth, it is the product of various disciplines and concepts that incorporate food theology, secular agrarianism, and Christian environmental ethics. Writers and theologians like Norman Wirzba, Ken Albala, Gary Fick, and Andrew Lenzy explore themes of food and faith within their research. Their works offer analyses that consider the centrality of food and community within the Christian tradition and emphasize the character of G-d as a creator. Lenzy says, "[a]ll creation, large and small, intelligent and unintelligent, sentient and non-sentient has worth because G[-]d values it."[6] This emphasis on creation and the value of life provide a basic foundation for the introduction of secular agrarianism into Protestant frameworks.

Agrarians and ecologists found a home within Protestantism through the works of Wendell Berry, Ellen Davis, and Gene Logsdon. These writers stem from different backgrounds in sacred agrarianism, agricultural scholarship, and biblical scholarship. Their incorporation of religious sentiments and terminology through romantic writing and an intrinsic association with American Christianity distinguish these authors as sacred agrarians, though the degree to which they fit that title varies. Their writings suggest that agrarianism "looks forward to a potentially healing future; it is informed by modern science and also by traditional patterns of thought and value…and may yet be adapted to meet present and future exigencies,"[7] as Ellen Davis explains. This perspective provides an emphasis on inquiry, optimism, and collaboration that secular agrarians build upon.

Scholars like Wes Jackson and Kimberly Smith analyze the religious ideas of Berry and his colleagues through academic study but they also bridge the gaps between agriculture, theology, science, and practice through theoretical and philosophical research. Jackson emphasizes American culture as the basis for a conversation about environmentalism. He says, "a language waits in our cultural depths for an intellectual and spiritual emphasis to give it full bloom."[8] Jackson sees religion as a tool for internalizing environmentalism through cooperation with both science and culture.

Christian environmental ethicists expound upon the intersection of nature and religion in reaction to food theologies and secular agrarianism through analyses of practical obligations outlined within Protestantism. Ethicists like Max Oelschlaeger and Michael Northcott emphasize the history of Christianity within the order of creation through arguments for biblical responsibility as they pertain to contemporary environmental crises. This perspective highlights patterns within environmental ethics as they pertain to movements in Christianity. Northcott writes, "a relational and ecological account of the human self-in-relation and of the non-human world is suggested by an anthropologically informed reading of attitudes to the created order and the relationality of human moral and social practices with nature which we find in the Hebrew Bible."[9] His understanding mirrors that of other Christian environmental ethicists who acknowledge the relationship between Christianity and environmentalism through philosophical discourse and historical analysis.

While these three areas of scholarship, food theology, secular and sacred agrarianism, and Christian environmental ethics extensively analyze the relationship between Christians, food, farming, and the earth, they fail to apply these ideas in a contemporary and realistic manner. Agrarian revivalism among Protestants is a new field of study and the gaps between scholarship and practice are shown through the lack of practical application and inquiry. Through interviews conducted with Protestant agrarians of various backgrounds I remedy this scholarly omission by comparing the comments of farmers, pastors, and congregants to the concepts mentioned above. In addition, I analyze the relevance of scholarship to contemporary agrarianism and observe the internalization of religious and scholarly concepts that outline a relationship between food and faith.

The participants featured within this research represent a vast array of perspectives within Protestant agrarianism, and their personal narratives support my arguments through the ideologies they personify. Their stories are significant because they express the application of similar principles, practices, and beliefs throughout North Carolina and, coupled with the arguments of the southern scholars mentioned above, complete a picture of southeastern Protestant agrarianism. Clay and Nancy, organic farmers and former Methodist ministers living in

eastern North Carolina, provide a lens that depicts the application of Protestantism to commercial farming, and because they host groups of students and volunteers regularly, Clay and Nancy's stories also acknowledge the element of community cultivation present within this movement. Shelly, the minister of a small Methodist congregation in western North Carolina, also emphasizes the importance of community cultivation through her church's garden project, which organizes a local farmer's market and provides free organic vegetables to local residents in need. David, the associate pastor of a large, affluent Baptist congregation in Charlotte, North Carolina serves residents of poorer Charlotte-metro neighborhoods through affiliation with a local, non-profit food distribution organization, Friendship Trays, which provides balanced meals to homebound Charlotteans. His church's garden project also emphasizes educational in-reach within the congregation, which contributes to the construction of church-wide ethics. Clarissa, a Methodist minister representing western North Carolina, also emphasizes the role of education in Protestant agrarianism through her interactions with college students. She created and led an alternative Spring Break trip for students which immersed them in the relationship between farming, food, and religion. In addition, other Protestant agrarians were interviewed for this project but their responses either repeated sentiments expressed by the subjects above, or did not offer responses that fit into the specific topics addressed within this paper. Each person interviewed graciously invited me into their life and taught me about agrarianism and religion through their histories, memories, beliefs, and identities.

3. Eating

"What we eat and how we eat is full of meaning about what we believe and what we value,"[10] says Gary Fick in his book *Food, Farming, and Faith*. His comments represent an important cultural reality which holds that food is foundational to identity. Religious identity is no exception to this idea; in fact Nancy, a farmer in Burlington, North Carolina, argues that, "for agrarians, food and religion can't be viewed separately."[11] For farmers like Nancy, humanity's relationship to food and with food always informs religious identity, and vice versa.

From its inception, Christianity took vastly different stances on food from its Jewish predecessors. The inclusion of foods previously deemed "unclean" contributed to the separation of Christianity from Judaism. The rituals, traditions, and scriptures that followed the emergence of Christianity depicted Jesus' death as an ultimate sacrifice which illustrated that, as Ken Albala explains, "[f]orgiveness comes as a free gift to the faithful, and the outward ritual forms are no longer necessary."[12] This argument places Jesus' behavior at the center of religious thinking, and the impending rituals which follow, and thus his life becomes the example from which Christian denominations draw. Conceptually, Jesus' influence remains at the forefront of Christian thinking**,** but the degree to which it inspires contemporary beliefs about the significance of food and farming is truly remarkable.

David, associate pastor of theology at a Baptist church in Charlotte, North Carolina, explains that, "Jesus would have been intimately connected to food in his community."[13] David's congregation, which planted, grew, harvested, and donated some five hundred pounds of food during the summer of 2012, believes that, to better understand Jesus, one must understand his relationship to food and the earth. "As a young Jewish man he would likely have had a family garden," says David, and this emphasis on Jesus' connection to the land through farming is evident, according to David, through the food related parables and miracles Jesus performed. His sentiment is mimicked by Ken Albala who claims, "Jesus himself, considering his audience, often spoke in terms they could understand, and so we find parables drawn from farming and fishing practices as well as several food miracles."[14] These miracles include the feeding of 5000 devotees, turning water into wine during a wedding feast, and using farming terminology regarding harvests to discuss his religious ideas. The popularity of these inquiries into the cultural traditions of Jesus' life propels the revival of agrarian practices among Americans today.

There is something romantic about agrarianism, which values tradition and heritage in the same way that Protestantism does and thus appeals to the spiritual sentimentality of the Christian tradition within a cultural environment focused on food. Not only is a theology of food romantic, it is also practical. Awareness about the fragility of earth and its resources, the threat of economic instability or collapse, and the increasing amount of information available about the plight of people in neighboring cities and countries, drives the Protestant revival of agrarianism because it is a movement which demands optimism and participation in the face of surmounting dread and increasing uninvolvement. "We need to take seriously the fact that people are lacking basic dietary needs, in our city,"[15] says David, whose garden grew out of the knowledge that some 70,000 Charlotteans live in areas without access to fresh food. He explains that farming "is a reclamation of our ideology" because it allows Christians to reconcile their religious tradition to their community through world-maintenance. Reconciliation is central to the emergence of Christian agrarianism. Through the religious convictions of various farmers and congregations,

Protestants are beginning to define reconciliation to the planet and to other people as an attainable, practical, spiritual solution to some of the problems of food access and distribution, which for them, all began in a garden.

"It is *more* than significant that life began in a garden,"[16] explained Shelly, during a conversation about the relationship between Protestants and agrarianism. For Protestants like Shelly, the roots of Christianity inform contemporary practices and beliefs because they contextualize one's current identity within the sacred history of the tradition. Thus good land, land that is meaningful and fertile, informs agrarian revivalism because it is an unmistakable link between the Garden of Eden and the local organic farm. Within agrarianism, land is an unmistakable holy ground and participation in the cultivation of land and agriculture is a religious right. Because the presence of G-d is thought to exist in every aspect of creation, for many Christians, their reaction to that principle and thus their involvement in gardens and world-maintenance is indicative of their larger religious identities. This belief stems from the creation myth in Genesis which illustrates that humanity's first home was a garden. Norman Wirzba expands upon this concept saying that, "[t]he Garden of Eden, literally the 'garden of delight,' is humanity's original and perpetually originating home, the place of our collective nourishment, inspiration, instruction, and hope."[17] When understood through the lens of its impact on contemporary agrarian ideologies, the Garden of Eden becomes a simultaneously mysterious and irreplaceable inspiration for Protestant farming and gardening.

The universality of eating and the biological need for nourishment unite people around food and thus around farming, which draws people to the rich and religious relationship between humanity and the mysteries of creation. It is humanity's increasing estrangement from land and food sources which drives Christians to reclaim their creation narrative and embrace agrarianism as a practical means to embody their religious texts. Wendell Berry contends that, "[e]aters...must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used."[18] His comments explain the sense of responsibility that eaters have to the land, and religiously he outlines the basis for obligation. Obligation is the result of the intrinsic spirituality with which the world is endowed, in the Christian worldview. Some farmers, like Clay, contend that the ability to nurture oneself with whole foods, appreciate the beauty of nature, and express the desire to consume food that leaves one feeling healthy, are all expressions of the human acknowledgement that the experience of food is innately spiritual. "People just, when they see a beautiful vegetable, they just light up,"[19] he says. Furthermore, the relationship between food, farming, and faith is a reciprocal one in which people engage with the earth as a living, breathing entity that both informs human life and *is* informed and affected by human life.

This reciprocity is central to agrarian revivalism because it determines Christian environmental ethics and assigns significance to those ethics based on a contemporary theology which emphasizes the presence of G-d. In *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating,* Norman Wirzba devotes a chapter to the concept of gratitude and the significance of saying grace in the Christian tradition. [20] He says that, "around a table and before witnesses, we testify to the experience of life as a precious gift to be received and given again."[21] The practice of expressing gratitude acknowledges the involvement of other people and environments in the experience of eating while also recognizing the role of G-d in providing the proper conditions for food to grow. "G-d, bless this food and bless the hands that prepared it,"[22] is the way David and his family say grace. He adds that, "preparing isn't just the person who made it, it's the person in the grocery store, the person that brought it in a truck, the one who put it in the truck, and finally, the one who picked it from the branch...and to me that completes the cycle of gratitude."**[23]** Gratitude expresses the relationship of people to the earth, to G-d, and to each other because it draws the focus away from oneself and encourages mindfulness about the practices that give food, and thus life, meaning.

Gratitude becomes reciprocal when it is extended to the land and to the ways people think about food and farming. For Protestants, this relationship is often understood through the life of Jesus, and the conviction to live according to his narrative is then adapted to the agrarian lifestyle. Protestants like Clarissa, a minister living in Asheville, North Carolina, emphasize proper interpretation of the life of Christ as the foundation for mindful eating. Jesus' life is characterized, for her, by a life that extends itself to people in need, and personifies the pervasiveness of G-d. Jesus' crucifixion is understood as an act of sacrifice which allows his followers to live in harmony with G-d, whom they were alienated from previously. The resurrection of Jesus and the appearance of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost are then understood as ways for Jesus' teachings and personhood to live on within his followers. Wendell Berry says, "[t]o live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation."[24] These are not simply poetic words for many Christians; they are the embodiment of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection contained within the reality of eating. Clarissa said, "I began to contemplate where my food comes from and wonder about how to live my life in a way that is worthy of something else's death. That's how I live as a Christian, that's how I want to live in all aspects of my life."[25] Her comments illustrate the pervasiveness of religion within food consumption and daily life. Protestant agrarians like Clarissa contend that faith and farming should not be viewed separately, and to stratify one from the other will continue to alienate humans both from food, and from each other.

The goal of agrarian revivalism among Protestants is largely unnamable, but a common thread seems to be an attempt at bridging the gap between food and community through religious faith. It aims to guide both religious and non-religious Americans alike toward a cultural theology that acknowledges the environmental and physical costs of eating while contemplating the internal and spiritual dimensions of consumption. "Food is a common denominator of faith," says Shelly. She adds, "Christians do not have a corner market on the theology of food and spirituality of food...but if we can't embrace that than we are the ones denying ourselves that love of community."[26] Though the people interviewed over the course of this research differ in respect to how explicitly they incorporate Christianity into their farming practices, I think they would all agree that their projects grew out of a desire to provide healthful food to their communities. For all of them this desire is directly related to their religious convictions about stewardship, and care, both of the earth and of people.

Shelly and David both described the emergence of their community garden projects as a response to the realization that their churches sit in the midst of food deserts. Food deserts are districts with little or no access to foods needed to maintain a healthy diet.[27] For Shelly and David the realization that their neighbors were unable to afford or geographically access healthful foods was an alarming find. In his book on Christian environmental ethics, Max Oelschlaeger writes that, "[t]he church, then, is a necessary part of the politics of community, for it can sustain a dialogue that can take us beyond ecocrisis."[28] This idea, that Protestantism can be the basis for ecological reconciliation and revival, is embodied by the efforts of David and Shelly who describe healthful food as the rightful inheritance of all people.

Food production as a form of social justice is central to understanding the revival of agrarianism in the southeastern United States. Providing food to neighbors, congregants, and the surrounding community is a popular means of creating conversations about the contributions of Protestants to American culture. Each of the farmers interviewed within this research acknowledged that donating their crops was an important aspect of the overall goals and ideologies behind farming because the spirit of agrarianism contends that food is a rightful part of being human. Though the amount donated and who receives the donated food varies in each case, the underlying theme is that giving is a religious duty to the community as an extension of G-d's generosity. Norman Wirzba explains it this way, "[r]eal food, the food that is the source of creaturely health and delight, is precious because it is a fundamental means through which God's nurture and love for the whole creation is expressed."[29]

4. Gathering

The interviews conducted for this project illustrate that at its core agrarian revivalism is a means of social justice for Protestants that seeks to reclaim the wholesome and holy nature of food and community. "We have to start with the Bible and realize that this is a biblical issue. Environmentalism is not tree-huggers, it is people of G-d, it is all people, it is people who should be concerned about where our food comes from,"[30] says David as he illustrates the inclusiveness in agrarianism. The significance of uniting around the table for a meal cannot be overlooked in this emerging worldview because gathering is central to the future of agrarianism. "Eating... is an invitation to enter into communion and be reconciled with each other,"[31] says Wirzba. Here, he indicates that gathering and achieving better health are significant themes within agrarianism. The contemporary agrarian sees food, work, and the value of life as inseparable and cooperative entities that separate agrarianism as a lifestyle from mindless and often heartless agribusiness. When connected to religious ideas within Christianity, the ways agrarianism values humanity gains a new degree of importance.

Shelly described the neighborhood in which her church is located with great detail as she mapped out the history of Oakley United Methodist Church. For her, caring for the Oakley community is a more pressing and religious matter than expanding her particular church. "When I came to this church I said I'm not interested in saving this dying church, I'm interested in living faithfully the Christian life in our community, in our place, with the land,"[32] says Shelly. This quote outlines the pervasiveness of agrarian revivalism which seeks to infiltrate and cooperate with communities and people through food. As a form of social justice, agrarianism provides an avenue for Protestants to engage with Christianity through reconciling their communities with their scriptural principles. Norman Wirzba expands upon this concept when he writes that, "G[-]d calls creatures made in the image of G[-]d to be hospitable, to participate in Christ's reconciling ways with the world...to eat with justice and mercy, and in doing so participate in the divine hospitality that first brought creation into being and daily sustains it."[33] Shelly would likely agree that this sort of ministry, the kind that focuses on caring for the needs of impoverished people, is connected to the intent of the Gospels in the most authentic way because it incorporates all people.

In Kimberly Smith's book, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition,* she outlines the basis for agrarian-minded community outreach—dependence. She writes, "[i]ndividual independence...is not the chief value of agrarian life...[d]ependence is the central fact of our existence; dependence must accordingly become 'the beginning of a new moral vision.'"[34] Her understanding of Berry's ideas emphasizes the importance of the local community in supporting its members. When combined with sentiments of provision and care associated with G-d, as a creator, this idea becomes the basis for religiously-motivated community involvement. In Berry's view, healthy dependence connects people to their community and thus sustains the community and its members.

This highlights a key component of the emerging Protestant perspective on agrarianism because it poses a question of the difference between responsibility and obligation. Are Christians responsible to the earth? Are they obligated to participate in world-maintenance? The majority of people interviewed in this research responded that as an extension of their religious belief in concepts like neighborliness, sacrifice, and stewardship, Christians are responsible to the earth because they are responsible to each other. The earth is valuable within the Protestant worldview for the same reason people and communities are valuable, because they are created and thus endowed with varying degrees of importance and connection to G-d. Wendell Berry explains this consciousness and responsibility in his essay "The Gift of Good Land," saying, "we must take care, among other things, of the land, which is never a possession, but an inheritance of the living, as it will be to the unborn."[35] For Protestants engaged with agrarianism the best way to express this intrinsic value system and accompanying responsibility is through community cultivation that provides healthful benefits to the community and the land.

Agrarianism ties the value and meaning of people to a desire for food that is both valuable and meaningful. Food thus becomes the vessel through which religious notions of health, happiness, fellowship, and meaning are communicated to the surrounding population. Ken Albala writes, "[w]hat we eat literally becomes us, and we become it...[l]ogically, therefore, food is among the most powerful expressions of identity, both for the individual and the group."[36] The revival of agrarianism reevaluates the way Protestant identity is thus understood within the American South. It moves beyond the walls of dying churches in rural or urban neighborhoods and instead seeks to position itself among the religious and non-religious alike, as an expression of the growing fluidity between Christianity and culture.

In her interview, Nancy also elaborated on the pervasiveness of faith within her farming experience by telling the story of her chaplaincy at a residency complex. At a community center connected with the children's hospital where she worked, Nancy coordinated a garden project to benefit the twelve families that lived within the complex. "All of the women were single moms, all of them had been homeless at one time, and all of them were HIV positive, and some of the children were as well,"[37] says Nancy. The families chose the plants and produce they wanted to grow and maintained the garden throughout the year. As time went on Nancy described the importance of the garden to her role in the community:

> It was incredible to use the garden to talk about life and death and what was going on in their life with sickness, and disease. Those topics are hard to talk about, especially with children, but we could go to the garden and we could talk about potatoes, for example. We talked about how potato vines had to die away, they had to die away before we could harvest the potatoes, but how that death gave way to new life. Doing that really got me more in touch with how you can use language of a garden to talk about language of faith...One of the mother's last meals was green beans that her child planted and picked for her, *that's* powerful. We could talk about some hard stuff with some easy language that they could grasp, and there's power in that.[38]

Nancy's story illustrates the application of religious ideas to cultural practices, through gardening, and shows the connectedness between the two.

This fluidity is expressed through similarities between the human experience and the agrarian experience. Because eating is a universal human need, Protestant agrarians argue that food establishes cultural themes and habits that mimic religious themes and experiences. Nancy explains this concept when tying her work on her farm to her religious life. "Sometimes when I think about spiritual disciplines I think there can be a compatibility to farming disciplines,"[39] explains Nancy. She recounts the prevalence of praying and contemplating while she works, saying "there's rhythm, you've got to water things every day, the pruning,"[40] each of these activities has religious significance says Nancy. Her comments place personal experience within agrarianism and reflect the idea that farming has cosmological significance.

Nancy's comments also promote the value of meaningful work, another important aspect of agrarian revivalism within the South. In his essay "The Body and the Earth," Wendell Berry says that, "[g]ood work is not just the maintenance of connections...but the *enactment* of connections."[41] He describes health as a state with "direct

connections between living and eating, eating and working, working and loving."[42] His emphasis on connections highlights the cooperation of all aspects of life and the healthful relationships that result from a cooperative consciousness. David explained that the idea of cooperation and participation are key aspects of his church's community garden because the garden draws people together under a desire for meaningful work. In return, the reward for such work is nourishment for both the body and the spirit. He said, "it has taken many, many people working really hard to make this [garden] possible...and the result is overwhelmingly positive, people are very thankful and very proud."[43]

David's comments illustrate the ways working in the garden effects both the temperament of the members and religious environment at his church. If, in the minds of Protestant agrarians, work is no longer isolated from love, or community, or purposefulness, then it is also no longer isolated from G-d. Thus working in nature becomes an extension of one's religious identity and reshapes the larger cultural understanding of what it means to care for the land. Dr. Wirzba writes that, "[i]nsofar as people practice the attention and discipline of good work, work that honors the Creator and affirms the need and nurture of creation's memberships, they share in the life-giving ways of G[-]d."[44] Agrarian revivalism provides different avenues to access G-d and assess the religious implications of participating in the cultivation of creation through an emphasis on inclusion and community involvement.

The importance of reimagining the role of G-d in food production and the need for a renewed consciousness about the implications of food choices is derived from the understanding that agrarianism is a sacramental theology. "What would it be to baptize someone with dirty water, or chemically polluted water?"[45] asks Shelly. For her, that example is comparable to perpetuating or encouraging food practices that degrade the earth and its people. Food is sacramental as an extension of the communion meal which connects Christians to eating in a significantly ritualistic way. Accompanying the focus on communion is the prevalence of food's centrality to the early Christian churches featured in the Bible. David discussed the church in the New Testament book of Acts and its commitment to equitable food distribution through an analysis of the verses expressing that, "they [early Christians] had all things in common"[46] and adds that "when people see that the early church was *committed* to helping everyone get healthy food, they just get it and they want to participate."[47] For many Protestants the reoccurrence of food and its centrality to the biblical narratives of the first Christians is indicative of a culturally and spiritually significant phenomenon. Norman Wirzba contends that in the context of agrarianism "[s]acramentality is not about 'adding' a religiously defined quality to things, but rather is more like an unveiling of the divine *liveliness* and *loveliness* that are always already at work within them."[48]

5. Grow and Become

In unveiling the sacramentality of agrarianism, farmers and pastors draw attention to the inconsistencies in contemporary American food practices and the harmful effects that these behaviors leave on the community. Agrarianism can, in this context, be explained as a reaction to the illness of American eating, and is in many ways a treatment for it. "Mindful eating seems like a better way,"[49] says Clarissa, an agrarian-minded minister from Asheville, North Carolina. "General society is focused on the cheapest, the fastest, however you can get your hands on it...and it is the outflow of a consumerist world,"[50] says Clarissa. Her comments highlight key discrepancies between the agrarian ideal of food culture and the current American food environment. Norman Wirzba explains it this way: "the very idea of fast, cheap, convenient food suggests eating is not supposed to be the activity whereby people honor G[-]d, appreciate creation, or accept responsibility for their membership within it."**[51]** Thus, in the minds of farmers and theologians alike, the problem lies within the current cultural circumstance, but they contend that Protestantism offers a solution.

"Church food...is by and large unhealthy...but eating more things that are fresh and local is the first step"[52] says Clay, whose comments illustrate that traditions and habits are not the last word on proper food theology because there is still the potential for reform. He emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the ills of food customs within the Protestant church and adapting them for the sake of new truths he finds both in the Bible and on the farm. For Protestants, correlating their choices and ideas with biblical scripture is foundational to effecting any sort of significant social change. The prominent role food plays throughout the Bible provides a reliable foundation from which to consider agrarian ideals as a solution to the troubling reality of American eating habits.

In his interview, David spoke at length about various food disputes and practices familiar to Christians in the books of Acts and Corinthians. He explains that "in Corinth, the wealthy people are eating all the food before the poor people get off work...and Paul says, 'how could you be so irresponsible to let the rich people eat everything...wait and share one with another.'"**[53]** According to David, the example of the Corinthian church is

paramount to understanding his current attitude towards church gardening because of its emphasis on justice. "The Bible has underlying themes about caring, compassion, generosity, sharing, and partnership,"[54] all of which are guidelines for a proper relationship with and theology about food, explains David. Gene Logsdon explains the problem of American consumptive eating this way, "'[f]eeding the world' is not the problem...[t]eaching people how to feed themselves is the problem."[55] By this, Logsdon is not employing the popular notion that people must become vehicles of their own, individualized success by helping themselves, instead he is acknowledging that understanding food for its wholesome, nutritional, and cultural content is about providing information about those very topics. In response to this void in American food consciousness, not only does Protestant-minded agrarianism present ideological solutions to cultural problems, it also offers practical solutions prompted by religious themes.

The centrality of educational outreach was among the most important goals of the garden and farming projects featured within this research. Clay and Nancy continually host groups of students, Girl Scouts, and volunteers interested in organic farming and allow them to participate in their planting and harvesting. Clay describes this as "reconnecting people to the earth," and emphasizes the importance of hosting groups on their farm because it educates and encourages a new generation of conscious eaters. David's gardening project has similar goals. Sunday school classes are located beside the garden and each class can adopt one of the raised beds to maintain throughout the season. He says, "kids will be more grateful and appreciative of a healthy diet if they realize that gardening is not easy work, and that someone had to work hard in order for them to eat."[56] Protestant agrarianism emphasizes education because it maintains a great sense of responsibility to future generations. Though he believes that agrarianism offers numerous other opportunities and solutions, Norman Wirzba holds that through agrarianism, "[i]f nothing else, we will at least demonstrate that we believe the future of our grandchildren is worth protecting."[57]

Within agrarianism, educational outreach and community involvement grow out of the publicity of gardens and farms. The stability of the Protestant church within various neighborhoods featured in this study provides a foundation upon which agrarians may build the connections between farming and faith. Protestantism provides an avenue via the conversion of church land to farm land for community-based garden projects to unite religious and non-religious people alike around the transmission and accumulation of knowledge. Brian Donahue writes, "[c]ommunity farms will not replace private farms, but they can play a critical role...[t]hey are the schools of agrarianism."[58] Shelly explains that their garden tries to value people through the merging of older skills and services with new innovative ideas and approaches. She describes the practice of canning as one area where the new and old work together. The garden "incorporates my church people, who've canned all their lives and...they feel valued because they're meeting a need that these young adults want to know,"[59] she says. Her project illustrates the potential to connect seemingly distant lifestyles and worldviews through agrarianism.

"I think for this church, but not only this church, I would say that farming makes our church relevant,"[60] says Shelly. Thus agrarianism becomes the medium through which Christianity and culture collide for many Protestants. The effects of this collision are reshaping cultural attitudes about Protestantism, as well as Protestant attitudes about Protestantism. "We're not out to proselytize or make people Christian, we're out to go be Jesus and walk in the way of love and light,"[61] explains Shelly. One may argue that Protestants are more *unconventionally* religious due to agrarianism which encourages the intersection of religion, culture, and community. Furthermore, agrarianism is understood as an extension of the ideas expressed in American Protestantism, not the abandonment of them. Wes Jackson writes that within Christianity, agrarianism presents "an argument for embracing an ecological ethic in a spirit of adventure as part of our religious heritage."**[62]** His comments embody the spirit of adaptation encompassed in the pursuit of agrarianism when coupled with the Protestant tradition, because ultimately both farming and faith grow to inform each other.

6. Conclusions

Redefining the significance of the land, of food, and of people requires Protestant agrarians to consider the scope and impact of these ideas on their religion itself. "People leave a mark on us too. Each one comes and they leave their spirit here in some regard,"[63] says Nancy as she illustrates the ways she is effected by the people she meets on the farm. Her comments support the understanding that the reciprocity of agrarianism is effecting the religious landscape of mainstream Protestantism on an individual and local level. As Protestants begin to think of food differently, they begin to think of themselves differently, and perhaps think of Christianity differently as well. Farming and garden projects that incorporate the surrounding community portray renewed understandings of Protestant themes tied to creation, stewardship, and sustainability.

The popularization of these religiously affiliated garden and farming projects supports the notion that world-maintenance is a relevant concern within Protestant churches. Agrarianism connects the emerging ideologies of the Christian tradition with the historical realities of agricultural endeavors in the United States through the generation of a new lifestyle. This lifestyle connects farming practices and religious practices in an attempt to preserve both traditions and results in the discovery that agrarianism affords Protestantism a new responsibility and role within mainstream American culture. Southern Protestantism is thus sustained, in part, through its incorporation into mainstream society and relies on its ability to connect with a changing culture.

The future of American Protestantism is thus dependent on its ability to include itself in society and adapt to the surrounding environment while preserving its identity. Food represents a problem, a need, and a space for innovation. Thus, it is an ideal backdrop for the kinds of Protestantism which answer these concerns through religious language in a secular setting. Shelly acknowledged the reality of that conclusion when saying that, "I think we all realize that there's something greater than ourselves when it comes to food...for us, our church just wants to be a part of talking about what that something is."[64] Agrarian revivalism among Protestants in the South is a means of participating in the conversation about the significance of living in relationship to the garden.

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8. Notes

1. Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 180.
2. Clay, Interviewed by author, 9 July 2012, Burlington, N.C.
Only the first names of interviewees are used throughout this paper to coincide with the Institutional Review Board request for anonymity.
3. Shelly, Interviewed by author, 2 October 2012, Oakley, N.C.
4. Barabara Kingsolver, "Foreword," in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), xvii.
5. Kingsolver, "Foreword," xvii.
6. Andrew Lenzy, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 9.
7. Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.
8. Wes Jackson, *Nature as Measure: The Selected Essays of Wes Jackson* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011), 24.
9. Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 163.
10. Gary W. Fick, Food, Farming, and Faith (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2008), 12.
11. Nancy, Interviewed by author, 9 July 2012, Burlington, N.C.
12. Ken Albala, and Trudy Eden, *Food and Faith in Christian Culture* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10.
13. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
14. Alabala and Eden, *Food and Faith in Christian Culture*, 12.
15. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
16. Shelly, Interviewed by author, 2 October 2012, Oakley, N.C.
17. Wirzba, Norman, *Food and Faith*, 35.
18. Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), 324.
19. Clay, Interviewed by author, 9 July 2012, Burlington, N.C.

20. “Saying grace” is a Christian tradition which expresses a sense of thankfulness for food. It typically precedes partaking in a meal.
21. Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 179.
22. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
23. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
24. Wendell Berry, “The Gift of Good Land,” in *The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), 304.
25.Clarissa, Interviewed by author, 18 October 2012, Asheville, N.C.
26. Shelly, Interviewed by author, 2 October 2012, Oakley, N.C.
27. The term “food desert” is an emerging term that encompasses various cultural patterns and circumstances. For further information on food deserts visit http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-desert-locator/documentation.aspx#Definition.
28. Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 200.
29. Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 2.
30. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
31. Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 11.
32. Shelly, Interviewed by author, 2 October 2012, Oakley, N.C.
33. Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 34.
34. Kimberly Smith, *Wendell Berry and Agrarian Tradition: a Common Grace* (Lawrence, K.S.: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 130.
35. Berry, “The Gift of Good Land,” 297.
36. Alabala and Eden, *Food and Faith in Christian Culture*, 7.
37. Nancy, Interviewed by author, 9 July 2012, Burlington, N.C.
38. Nancy, Interviewed by author, 9 July 2012, Burlington, N.C.
39. Nancy, Interviewed by author, 9 July 2012, Burlington, N.C.
40. Nancy, Interviewed by author, 9 July 2012, Burlington, N.C.
41. Wendell Berry, “The Body and the Earth,” in *The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), 133.
42. Berry, “The Body and the Earth,” 132.
43. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
44. Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 76.
45. Shelly, Interviewed by author, 2 October 2012, Oakley, N.C.
46. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
47. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
48. Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 202.
49. Clarissa, Interviewed by author, 18 October, 2012, Asheville, N.C.
50. Clarissa, Interviewed by author, 18 October, 2012, Asheville, N.C.
51. Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 27.
52. Clay, Interviewed by author, 9 July 2012, Burlington, N.C.
53. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
54. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
55. Gene Logsdon, “All Flesh is Grass: A Hopeful Look at the Future of Agrarianism,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 161-162.
56. David, Interviewed by author, 1 August, 2012, Charlotte, N.C.
57. Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 6.
58. Brian Donahue, “The Resettling of America,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 47.
59. Shelly, Interviewed by author, 2 October 2012, Oakley, N.C.
60. Shelly, Interviewed by author, 2 October 2012, Oakley, N.C.
61. Shelly, Interviewed by author, 2 October 2012, Oakley, N.C.
62. Wes Jackson, *Nature As Measure*, 24.
63. Nancy, Interviewed by author, 9 July 2012, Burlington, N.C.
64. Shelly, Interviewed by author, 2 October 2012. Oakley, N.C.