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Mixed Farming by Covenant Renewal

PART 2

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In the first part of this series, the practice of farming was considered as an ethical law-order process of production that applied and rendered visible some of the agricultural implications of Christ's comprehensive redemption. The foundational principle of rest and the concept of a transformed Sabbath were especially highlighted so that the agricultural task of mixed farming by covenant renewal could be viewed in terms of the redemptive, liturgical dimension of agricultural dominion and reconstruction.

This specific, practical application of the Great Commission was then brought into focus as a transformational work, rather than just a restorative work.

In this part of the series, the general scene is once again the dominion task and the covenantal responsibility of transforming the land by means of covenant renewal. But before bringing into focus the view that enhances and highlights the re-creation patterns and covenant sequences that give this work's agricultural structure of production its distinctive sabbatical hue, we should view our scene in its proper historical time perspective and historic context. Otherwise, we will reduce the breadth and depth of the view and the sabbatical hue that will eventually be brought into focus.

Historical Time and Historic Context

Any attempt to reconstruct and master a calling — to obediently and systematically apply, by God's enabling grace, God's Word to a specific area or discipline of life — requires an adequate awareness of the actual historic context and circumstances in which God has chosen to providentially place and position us as His covenantkeeping creatures.

We do not need exhaustive nor per-

fect knowledge for this task. God has already revealed to us the nature and objectives of our dominion task. He has already revealed to us the terms of His dominion covenant and the authoritative and sufficient principles of action required of covenantkeepers.

What we need, rather, is the competent, victory-oriented, long-term steady performance of the tactical duties assigned to us by God. God knows the grand strategy of the victory which He established definitively at Calvary and which He is now progressively working out in history. Our responsibility is to recognize and respond to the distinctive warfare of our age, and to deploy the forces and tools entrusted to us by God.

This will involve, as Ian Hodge reminded us in his "Reflections of a Lobbyist" in the May 1990 edition of *Probe*, an "accurate analysis of the territory we're about to conquer and a battle plan appropriate to the situation. It is no good using planes, tanks and artillery when a guerilla campaign is what is required."

It is important, therefore, not only for farmers, but for all Christians to consider the extent to which they are witnessing a dying culture and a world that is being torn apart by God in judgement; and the extent to which they are interacting with a culture that has travelled down the road of "the politics of slavery" to traffic in salvation by political action.

Rationalism and Natural Farming

Although modern man's dualistic philosophy of rationalism and irrationalism, phenomenal and noumenal still imbues and guides Australian agriculture research, extension, and education as the dominant paradigm, its "shield of rationalism" is fading. This has been espe-

The Failure of Public Education

Ian Hodge

John Taylor Gatto is a man with a mission. A former advertising copy-writer who thought there was more to life, turned to teaching. Now, after 26 years in the teaching profession, and winner of New York State Teacher of the Year award, Mr Gatto has delivered a provocative series of addresses aimed at highlighting what he calls "the hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling."

In his book, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1992), Mr Gatto gives the promoters of compulsory schooling the results of 26 years of observation in the classroom. It cuts at the heart of some cherished beliefs. Some argue that it is necessary to ensure all children are educated. Since there are parents "out there" who fail in their obligation to educate their children, compulsory school attendance will apparently overcome this problem.

Here, unfortunately, we come across a major difficulty. There is a world of difference, between compulsory schooling and compulsory education. While it may be possible to compel school attendance, this should not be confused with education and learning. Compulsory schooling "doesn't work because its fundamental premises are mechanical, anti-human, and hostile to family life."

What is the hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling? According to this experienced teacher there are seven lessons taught in the schools today. These are:

1. Confusion. Education is a failure

cially apparent from the 1960s.¹

Prior to the mid 1960s, western rationalism and "scientific" farming still clearly evidenced a Biblical heritage and framework that is well epitomized by Arthur Hardcastle Renard's "elementary scientific text-book on the use of fertilizers" for Australian farmers, which was entitled *The ABC of Rational Manuring on Scientific Principles: A practical treatise on the employment of manures on the soils of Australasia with safety and profit, illustrating clearly the art of feeding the soil with scientific principles with common sense.*

But let us note well how Renard self-consciously used this Biblical heritage and framework — the common grace or knowledge of God's truth, law, and order — to pervert the truth and posit natural law rather than Biblical law as the standard of righteousness "for the guidance of agriculturalists working under the special conditions of Australian climates and soils."

In his opening chapter Renard writes that "The further one progresses in the study of Nature and her methods, the more one becomes convinced of the wisdom of complying with her laws and of the uselessness of trying to escape the penalties she remorselessly decrees for the disregard of her inflexible rules. . . . The punishment always fits the crime. On the other hand, the rewards are in proportion to the intelligence and obedience shown. One might just as reasonably hope to stop the tides from rising and falling as to evade the certain defeat that awaits the schemes of all those who fail to conform to Nature's fixed laws."

For Renard, it was "Nature's fixed laws", not God's Covenant and God's cosmic personalism that is man's primary constant. He writes concerning "the position that Nature holds in relation to agriculturalists," that "she is kind and most liberal to her loyal and obedient subjects, but stern and merciless in her treatment of rebels against her rules. Nature's penalties for violation of her laws in agriculture take the form of plant diseases, pests above and below ground, etc. The troubles of Australian farmers have begun in earnest, but they can be removed and prevented hereafter by the use of manures on the proper balanced system. Thus loss is avoided and profit made in the one operation; a double gain from obedience."

Renard then concludes that "Ignorance of Nature's laws does not avail as an excuse for transgression, for it is the first and bounden duty of every agriculturalist, seeing that he places himself vol-

untarily under her sway and protection, to make himself thoroughly acquainted with these laws and faithfully abide by them. Let him rigidly conform to their principles in every direction, and when desirous of employing artificial means to assist in the attainment of natural ends, let him copy the example of Nature with exactitude, and success will be at once his portion and his due."²

Rebellious Counsel and the Environment

Agriculture practice changed markedly with this type of idolatry and rebellious counsel. J. B. Hirst has observed that the results were not always as the agricultural reformers had envisioned. He writes concerning the South Australian model, that "in one sense the agricultural reformers were cheated. They had associated the establishment of a scientific . . . agriculture with new crops and closely worked fields. In fact, the first notable achievement of the professors of agriculture was to show the farmers that they could grow wheat successfully on exhausted and inferior soil if they used superphosphate and allowed their land to lie fallow periodically. These practices, which became widespread early in the new century, established wheat-growing on a new and more permanent basis, and wheat meant big paddocks, large holdings and an unchanged landscape."³

We should also note the importance of "the factor endowment," which Colin White has emphasized in his thought-provoking re-interpretation of Australia's development, and in particular, "the abundance of land and the relative scarcity of both labour and capital, particularly the latter. An initial lack of capital implied a shortage of equipment and tools, and of buildings and fencing, or alternatively, the substitution of cheap inputs where possible. An abundance of land meant a tendency to monoculture and continuous cropping, to impermanence and easy movement."⁴

Had Australia's early farmers been covenantally faithful in their agricultural dominion over creation, the abundant supply of land would have enabled them to leave part of their land to lie fallow each year, which would have meant a movement toward the development of a complex agriculture with mixed structures of production.

Christians did, however, respond in other ways to Australia's climatic and factor endowments. John Ridley's invention of the wheat stripper; and days of prayer and thanksgiving for severe droughts are notable examples.⁵

today because it has no connecting philosophy to integrate knowledge and learning. "Everything I teach is out of context. I teach the un-relating of everything. I teach dis-connections. I teach too much: the orbiting of planets, the law of large numbers, slavery, adjectives, architectural drawings, dance, gymnasium, choral singing, assemblies, surprise guests, fire drills, computer languages, parents' nights, staff-development days, pull-out programs, guidance with strangers my students may never see again, standardized tests, age-segregation unlike anything seen in the outside world. . . . What do any of these things have to do with each other? . . . Confusion is thrust upon kids by too many strange adults, each working alone with only the thinnest relationship with each other, pretending, for the most part, to an expertise they do not possess" (p. 2).

Children are bewildered because the subjects make no sense, and will continue to make no sense until a unifying factor is brought into the classroom. The only unifying factor, however, is the Triune God of Scripture, and it is certain that in the present educational climate, the problem of confusion will not abate.

Mr Gatto's biting criticism of many of the teachers should also not pass unmentioned. It is clearly evident that so much of what is called education today is by people who have done little more than pass their school and university exams. They come to their subject matter with very little practical experience, but with the appropriate tertiary degree. It is little wonder that the subject matter is taught in a clinical and often uninteresting manner. The teacher knows no better. This is the problem of academia today, whether it is the school, the university, or the seminary. The scholarly world has appeal to many, and while it has a proper place, the current emphasis and method of attaining scholarly positions leaves much to be desired. We have too many academics and not enough practitioners — good practitioners who know how to impart the knowledge they have obtained in the real world.

2. Class Position. The present system of classes by chronological age teaches the children a class consciousness that will last the rest of their lives. "My job is to make them like being locked together with children who bear numbers like their own. . . . If I do my job well, the kids can't even imagine themselves somewhere else, because I've shown them how to envy and fear the better classes and how to have contempt for the

1. See further, Gary North, *Unholy Spirits: Occultism and New Age Humanism* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1988).

2. Melbourne, Victoria: George Robertson & Co., 1912, pp. 9-11.

3. J. B. Hirst, *Adelaide and the Country 1870-1917. Their Social and Political Relationship* (Melbourne, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1973), p. 56.

4. Colin White, *Mastering Risk: Environment, Markets and Politics in Australian Economic History* (Melbourne, Victoria: Oxford University Press Australia 1992), p. 163.

5. See on John Ridley's invention, Robert Flegg, "The Gift of the Wheat Stripper," in Dr. Graham McLennan, ed., *Understanding Our Christian Heritage* (Orange, New South Wales: Christian History Research Institute, 1989), Vol. 2, pp. 53-56. For days of prayer and thanksgiving for severe droughts in Australia's history, see Graham McLennan, "National Prayer — Biblical and Australian Precedents," *Logos*, Vol. 6, No. 1., Feb-April, 1992, pp. 7f; and for a recent e.g., see Linda Gross, "Prayer for rain brings community together," *Australian Farm Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 6, August 1992, p. 14.

Dry-Farming and the Sabbath

Sadly, however, biblical frameworks, patterns, and sequences such as the fallow — the sabbath rest of arable land (see Exodus 23; 10-11 and Leviticus 25: 1-7) — were generally perverted by autonomous man in his escape from covenantal creaturehood. The biblical fallow became a systematically worked, bare-soil fallow that was heralded by *The Victorian and South Australian Dairy Farmer* as a “scientific application” that led to “the evolving of specialised implements to do the work.”

The June 8, 1937 edition of this journal featured an article on “The Science of Fallowing,” which claimed that “With such specialised machinery at his disposal, the Australian farmer is able to work the fallows thoroughly and economically, with a minimum of labor. Only by the application of such scientific methods has he achieved success in this country where rainfall is so uncertain” (pp. 24-25).

“Dry-farming” production processes were successful in achieving efficiencies of moisture and soil water storage and became an essential prerequisite to crop production over large areas. But they were, nonetheless, rebellious practices that have today produced their ill-fruits.

The Australian farmer was encouraged not to waste precious soil moisture and fertility for his crops by allowing his paddocks to fallow for a year with a mixed sward of volunteer plants.

Nor dare he waste time and miss a crop every seventh year. “Dry-farming” meant that he could reduce his fallow to a few summer months if need be, and thereby turn his back on his Creator and declare man’s year — a corollary of autonomous man’s week, which is a full seven days.

Like man’s day of rest, autonomous man has redefined and subsequently perverted the year of rest into a year of apparent economic loss. Consequently, “man would henceforth be faced with alternative costs. For every hour that he remained at rest, man would lose the income which that hour’s labor might have produced. Outside the covenant, man can no longer count on the fixed relationship between God’s law and God’s blessings. Outside the covenant, rebellious man can no longer rest assured that his rest will have its reward. In man’s week, men are faced with a decision: steal time from God’s sabbath rest, but increase their short-run income; or forfeit short-run income on the day of rest, but reap the rewards of faithfulness that God promises to his covenantally faithful people.”⁶

Rest, Rotation, and Further Rebellion

Another hand, knows that he can allow his paddocks to rest for a full year in rotation, for every year, like every week, is God’s year. He can allow the land to rest as a cost-free blessing in full assurance that God’s providence will sustain him and prosper him for his confidence is in God’s covenantal faithfulness and in God’s sovereign control of historic time.

Because the New Covenant did not just restore the Old Covenant, but, as we noted in the first part of this series, resulted in its transformation, there has been a change in the arrangement of time and space with respect to the principle of the Sabbath. Although the principle of the Sabbath is still in force, its application has changed. Farmers can now apply the principle of rest on a rotational basis.

Once again, autonomous man has attempted to pervert the New Covenant application of this abiding principle. The result has been that the agricultural practice of rotation has been employed to mitigate the fallow and to escape the principle of rest.

R. H. Bruce was one popular educator who didactically wrote that “Land not producing crops, is waste land to the farmer, but it was discovered that while grains robbed the soil of a nourishment, certain root crops could be grown in those same soils immediately after the grain crops, and not only did they thrive, without further weakening the soils, but they actually enabled the soil to recover its strength. Each year, therefore, sees a movement of crops from field to field in regular order, and this movement is known as the ‘rotation of crops’.”⁷

A farmer who attempts to reconstruct agriculture should thus be mindful that he confronts an agricultural heritage of long-term rebellion, the cursed effects of which, are part of his historic context.

One such consequence is that the processes of ploughing and cultivation are increasingly being viewed as “unnatural” practices that should be minimized, and where possible, eliminated from a farm’s structure of production since they have allegedly caused widespread soil and land degradation.

Accordingly, policy statements concerning sustainable agriculture and the concept of “ecologically sustainable development” promoted by the 1987 Bruntland Report, *Our Common Future*, often assert that in physical and “historical” terms, only the hunter-gatherer “farm” is ecologically sustainable.⁸

dumb classes. Under this efficient discipline the class mostly polices itself into good marching order. That’s the real lesson of any rigged competition like school. You come to know your place” (p. 5).

Western civilisation, however, has been marked by people who, while recognising their current status in life, were able to climb out of the rut and reach a higher level on the social ladder. The schools are working against this view. This might explain the frustration evident in so many young people, clamouring for “the government” to solve their present financial status by providing jobs or money. They don’t see themselves starting at the bottom of the job ladder and climbing their way to the top because the school has reinforced the idea that they cannot climb out of their present class.

3. Indifference. This is one of the most challenging aspects of Mr Gatto’s thesis. “I teach children not to care too much about anything, even though they want to make it appear they do. How I do this is very subtle. I do it by demanding that they become totally involved in my lessons, jumping up and down in their seats with anticipation, competing vigorously with each other for my favor. It’s heartwarming when they do that; it impresses everyone, even me. When I’m at my best I plan lessons very carefully in order to produce this show of enthusiasm. But when the bell rings I insist they drop whatever it is we have been doing and proceed quickly to the next work station. They must turn on and off like a light switch. Nothing important is ever finished in my class nor in any class I know of” (p. 6).

While it should be remembered that life is never such that we can always follow our interests when and how we’d like to, there is certainly some truth in Mr Gatto’s claim that “the lesson of bells is that no work is worth finishing, so why care too deeply about anything? . . . Bells destroy the past and future, rendering every interval the same as any other, as the abstraction of a map renders every living mountain and river the same, even though they are not. Bells inoculate each undertaking with indifference” (p. 6).

The biblical concept of “redeeming the time” (Eph. 5:16), however, places on man the necessity to plan and allocate in a rational manner his limited resources. While it is true that there can be too much regulation, for the Christian Mr Gatto’s comments must be read with a critical eye. If men and women were only to do what they felt like doing when they felt like it, there are many things in life that would be overlooked, ignored, or never given proper attention.

6. Gary North, *The Dominion Covenant: Genesis. An Economic Commentary on the Bible*, Volume 1. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 2nd. edn., 1987), ch.5: “God’s Week and Man’s Week,” p. 75.
7. R. H. Bruce, *Home and Overseas Geography* (Regional Series) (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd., 1935), p. 200f.
8. See further, Noel Weeks, “How the False History of the World Arose,” audio-cassette distributed by Creation Science Foundation, P.O. Box 302, Sunnybank, Qld., 4109.

BIBLICAL ETHICS

But soil and land degradation, and the degeneration of modern agriculture in general, is an ethical consequence of modern man's denial of the Creator-creature distinction, and in particular, the inter-related doctrines of creation and providence.

Soil and land degradation is in essence a moral, not a metaphysical problem. It is, therefore, an unnecessary condition, not a necessary one. It is the consequence of the rebellion of sinful men against God. Such covenant-breaking creates a conflict in men and between men, and between men and the creation which God made wholly good.

Such questions as, "By what standard do we plough and cultivate?" and "How do we operate a farm in terms of God's requirements for agriculture?" are thus paramount and basic to any long-term agri-cultural solution.

For it is never a question of no standards verses God's standards. Nor is the primary issue or question one of no change verses change. It is always a question of *whose* change, and *by what* standard?

(To Be Continued)

4. Emotional Dependency. In the hierarchy of the school, there is a chain of command that the children — and the parents — must learn to obey. There are no rights in a school, only privileges which are granted or withdrawn at the discretion of the teachers. "Rights may be granted or withheld by any [school] authority without appeal, because rights do not exist inside a school — not even the right of free speech, as the Supreme Court has ruled — unless school authorities say they do" (p. 7).

Again, we do not necessarily agree with the manner in which this point is made by Mr Gatto, while we can recognise its existence. But the major victim of the emotional dependency illustrated here is not the child but the family. Children are taught to become emotionally dependent upon the school at the expense of their parents. Thus, compulsory schooling is one of the major causes of the breakdown of the family in our day.

Elsewhere, Mr Gatto recognises this point. "It appears to me as a school-teacher that schools are already a major cause of weak families and weak communities. They separate parents and children from vital interaction with each other and from true curiosity about each other's lives. Schools stifle family originality by appropriating the critical time needed for any sound idea of family to develop — then they blame the family for its failure to be a family" (p. 74.).

5. Intellectual Dependency. Students and their parents are taught to depend intellectually upon the school. "It is the most important lesson, that we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives" (p. 8). Too many people are afraid to make their own decisions and judgements about matters. They want "the experts" to make the judgements for them, whether that expert is the school teacher, the manager in the office, or the pastor in the local church. Independence of mind gives way so that it is swayed by a myriad of competing opinions by others, the latest one being in vogue for the present.

6. Provisional Self-Esteem. While it is true that man in his sin is too eager to promote self and pride, it is also certain that a person must learn how to assess himself accurately. Unfortunately, Mr Gatto does not reinforce the biblical no-

tion that our evaluation of ourselves must be in the light of God's standards of holiness and righteousness. But it is equally certain that a person who does not know how to make judgements about himself at all is also at a great disadvantage. Yet, "the lesson of report cards, grades, and tests is that children should not trust themselves or their parents, but should instead rely on the evaluation of certified officials. People need to be told what they are worth" (p. 11).

There is another side to this issue. While the school leaves Christianity and religion out of the curriculum, students will learn that man, and not God, is the measure of all things. Since there is no such thing as man in abstract, students without a biblical base will learn to judge everything by their own inner standards.

7. One Can't Hide. Compulsory schooling becomes all pervasive. The home is invaded by the school with the insistence that homework be carried out in the family home. "The effect of surveillance, if not that surveillance itself, travels into private households, where students might otherwise use free time to learn something authorized from a father or a mother, by exploration, or by apprenticing to some wise person in the neighborhood. . . . Children will follow a private drummer if you can't get them into a uniformed marching band" (pp. 11-12).

These are the seven subjects of the hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling. Unfortunately, while recognising these alien subjects in the classroom, Mr Gatto is unable to find an alternative but one: complete individualism.

Man must always wrestle with the problem of his own individuality and community. No one can be a complete island, since the interdependencies are established in life beyond the individual's control. The biblical doctrine of the Trinity, Unity and Diversity, the One and the Many, offers a way out of the impasse of humanism: man at the centre of the universe as maker of his own world.

Dumbing us Down is a timely reminder of an education system run amok. It is time the tables were turned and a restoration of godly learning based on the family — not the school — was restored. May each one of us do our best to bring this to pass.