

That's What . . .
I'm Talking About
(Collected Essays & Reviews)

Richard Baldwin Cook

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HUNGRY PEOPLE WANT TO FEED THEMSELVES - NOT BE FED BY OTHERS

Creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to Corruption and receive the splendid freedom of the children of God. (Romans 8:21)

My first encounter with migrant farm workers was in the vegetable growing areas of New Jersey in 1970. Each summer thousands of migrant laborers arrive from Florida and Puerto Rico seeking work topping onions, picking tomatoes or cutting asparagus. Often an entire family would arrive from Florida and look for housing in a labor camp. Frequently there was no housing available, and when it was, it was often unfit for human occupancy. My work at that time (as director of a local Migrant Ministry) was to attempt to find temporary housing for individuals and families who literally had no place to live and little or no food or money. I became haunted by the terrible irony of working people in such conditions - people who harvest the food for the wealthiest nation on earth and yet are not able to have a house for themselves or food for their children.

Under the best of circumstances, it isn't easy to find a place to live. And for penniless farm workers in rural America, decent housing is almost impossible to find. My efforts to locate emergency housing were largely a failure. Communities that are happy to have the labor of farm workers are not at all happy to have the workers themselves. I came to ask myself: Wouldn't it be better if farm workers had control over their own lives and were not dependent upon the accidental presence of a "migrant ministry?" Wouldn't it be better if farm workers could house themselves? Wouldn't it be better if farm workers could take care of their own children? Wouldn't, it be better if the children themselves did not have to labor in the fields for the family to have enough to eat?

Yes. It would be better if farm workers had the resources to do these things for themselves - just as it is better for everyone to do such things for ourselves. But as soon as one answers “yes” to the liberation question one needs to ask a further question: *What is my responsibility to those who harvest the food that I eat?* The answer to this question takes shape in a series of propositions.

(1) FOR THE SAKE OF THE LIBERATING GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST, CHRISTIANS OUGHT TO ASSIST FARM WORKERS IN THEIR STRUGGLE TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN LIVES.

Paul the Apostle wrote (Romans 8) that creation itself has fallen into corruption. Paul is speaking of the whole of creation and therefore the corruption is pervasive, including questions of personal morality, relations between persons, mortality, political and economic systems. But the final word spoken over God’s creation is the word “freedom.” For the whole of creation “will obtain the splendid freedom (liberation) of God’s children.” (Romans 8:21) This indivisible gospel of liberation surely extends to men and women who are struggling to effect a measure of liberation from an oppressive and corrupt economic system. (All economic systems are corrupted to a greater or lesser degree. What is required of Christians is, first of all, to *identify* those being oppressed and then *identify with* them.)

(2) THE FIRST STEP FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS CHRISTIAN TO TAKE IN THE DIRECTION OF FARM WORKER LIBERATION: LISTEN TO WHAT FARM WORKERS THEMSELVES ARE SAYING ABOUT THEIR CONDITIONS.

For almost 20 years [written in 1979] farm workers have been building their own organization, setting their own agenda, seeking collective bargaining through the

United Farm Workers Union, AFL-CIO. Cesar Chavez and those farm workers with him are making the life-long sacrifices which are necessary to bring lasting change in conditions for farm laborers in our country. An approach which is based primarily on *our own* perception of the needs and *our own* prescription for a solution, which does not pay close attention to what farm workers themselves are saying, is likely to be presumptive and patronizing.

**(3) FARM WORKERS, LIKE OTHER WORKERS
(INDEED, LIKE THEIR EMPLOYERS AND ALL THE
REST OF US), WANT TO HAVE THE FREEDOM
TO JOIN TOGETHER IN A MUTUALLY
BENEFICIAL ASSOCIATION.**

In unity there is strength. In California there have been state-supervised secret ballot union representation elections since 1975. In those elections farm workers have voted overwhelmingly for union representation. Any grower who doubts this ought to be willing to accept collective bargaining preceded by a supervised, secret ballot representation election.

**(4) SOME PART OF THE CHURCH NEEDS TO BE
PRESENT WITH FARM WORKERS AS THEY GO ABOUT
THE DIFFICULT WORK OF ORGANIZING.**

It is part of the mission of the church to be present with those who are the poorest workers in our society. The church seeks to affirm such a *ministry of presence and of servanthood*, be open to such a ministry, and give it support. This is not the work of the whole church, which is concerned about the liberation of every person. But some (small?) part of the church needs to be focused on the needs of farm workers. Why? Because farm workers are asking for such a ministry; and because the church needs it for its own sake, to fulfill the Gospel mandate to be present with and be in the service of the poor (Matthew 25).

***(5) IN OUR WORLD, AN ETHIC OF LOVE DOES NOT
CONFLICT WITH THE ACQUISITION OF POWER.***

God in the metaphor of Scripture, is our Father and has created all that is. God has given us authority to subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28). God has sent the Son to us “in power” (Romans 1:4). No one who clearly perceives that he or she is a child of God willingly accepts the domination of “the principalities and power, the world rulers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12). In fact, those men and women of the farm workers’ movement are about the business we all should be about: reclaiming a fallen, corrupted creation (Romans 8:21).

***(6) THE ROLE OF MEDIATOR IS NOT A PROPER ROLE
FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH IN THE FARM WORKERS’
STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION.***

Mediation implies an equality of bargaining power on both sides. Such an equality does not exist in the present struggle between the tiny farm workers’ union on one side and the tremendous power of the agribusiness industry on the other. It is likely that conflict is a result of an inequality of power rather than a balance of power. Therefore the church is serving the interests of peace and justice by seeking ways to correct the power imbalance, i.e., supporting farm worker organizing efforts.

***(7) THE SPECIFIC DEEDS OF INDIVIDUAL
CHRISTIANS ARE IMPORTANT.***

Each one of us has a special bond, which joins us to the farm workers. We actually take into our bodies the products of their hands. And we can move from a posture of concern to one of effective action. You can, right where you are, become part of a national network of persons who *accept responsibility for* bringing a measure of justice into

the lives of farm workers. You can become informed about the current issues in the struggle. Then, after becoming informed you can take action. You can help develop a strategy (and get helpful ideas from others) about how your own church might become more involved.

The crux of the issue comes down to economic power. The major tool of economic power for farm workers is the boycotting of the products of companies who fail to bargain in good faith.

Our deepest convictions about life require that we take up the cause of the men, women and children who harvest our food, and make their cause our own. This cause holds out the promise of a life of hope, of joy and of purposeful labor.

For more information:

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**FARM WORKERS:
FROM THE SHADOWS INTO THE LIGHT**

“Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people . . .” (Thomas Jefferson, Notes on Virginia)¹

“There are times, you know, when I ask myself what I ever did to deserve a deal like this. You know what I mean? I mean I feel there must be someone who’s decided you should live like this, for something wrong that’s been done.” A farm worker on the East Coast Migrant Stream, father of six ²

The ideology of racial supremacy has cast a long shadow far ahead of itself, extending into our own time and doubtless far into the future. These notions of superiority become most potent in an environment of forgetfulness of history. When permitted to flourish unhindered and unchallenged, racism is insidious both for the destruction it brings down upon its victims and also because of the subtlety by which these ideas and theories insinuate themselves into the matrix of beliefs and customs of peoples the world over.

The situation of farm workers provides a contemporary example of the distressing and pervasive impact which racial exclusivism has within our culture. For Christians, who accept responsibility for the renewal of God’s creation, the issue is a critical one. This is so because those who position themselves against excluded and deprived persons are so often part of the life of the local and the institutional church. The issue is sociological as well as theological because middle class Christians are frequently disengaged from the living problems of impoverished people.

The issue is also thoroughly political because the jurisdiction of government has been broadened to cover

virtually every aspect of modern life. Unless the sociological and political aspects of our culture are addressed, theological commentary amounts to little more than bells and whistles; the management of the engine is in other hands.

Short and Long Memory

For generations the dreams and hopes of people who pick the crops in America have been cruelly refuted by experience. Temporary quarters in rural slums, domination by cruel and unscrupulous labor contractors, the daily fear of deportation by government agents, and exclusion of oneself and one's children from health care and educational opportunities are both terrible and commonplace concerns for farm workers.³ Certainly the situation of farm workers must be addressed by society as a whole, for no matter how hard farm laborers work in the fields, these harsh conditions do not change - because the forces which gave rise to these conditions are found elsewhere than in the fields. If churches and their members were not so far removed from all of this, we might be justified in referring to these conditions as urgent pastoral problems.

Government policy and economic practice in this area have a long if not venerable history and are rooted in patterns, which extend back into the colonial period of the nation. This point should be kept clearly in view as the debate continues regarding the nation's immigration policies. The frontiers of the United States have never been closed to agricultural workers for the very practical reason that the workers are essential to the health of the agricultural industry as a whole. Today, however, the workers are brought, or come on their own, for a season at a time rather than for a lifetime. In fact, the current political and economic climate demands that they leave as soon as the harvest is done.⁴

Since the United States is the greatest commercial empire that the world has yet known, it should not surprise anyone that many thousands of individuals make their way into the country by whatever means possible, legal and otherwise. And since the executive branch of the government is bound to enforce the immigration laws, it is common for government agents to seek out and chase down suspected “illegals” and subject them to incarceration and summary deportation. The current government practice of hunting laborers down and shipping them out of the country should not be thought of as a new and unsavory aberration in our national life. These policies and procedures are not some wild variety of weed, which has grown up while we were not paying attention.

Residual Slavery . . .

From the beginning, American agriculture has imported its laborers, drawing on the poor of the world for the essential tasks of planting and harvesting. On America’s commercial farms in particular, people of color have always picked the crops. For more than two hundred years the South relied upon indentured and slave labor. George Washington, the eighteenth century Virginia planter and Episcopal vestryman, who conducted our national war for independence, was not interested in an economic revolution. General Washington had his reasons, over two hundred of them, which was the number of chattel slaves, including children, who lived and labored at Mount Vernon. This number does not encompass the indentured servants that he “purchased” for shorter periods of time before and after he was president.⁵ I draw attention to George Washington not so that we may point a self-justifying finger at the morals of an earlier day. President Washington wanted to free his slaves, but he knew he could not and also survive economically. The system was in place.

With the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862 and the formal termination of slavery, the promise of farm land was held out to black freemen and women. Harriet Tubman sang at that time,

*Come along! Come along! Don't be alarmed!
Uncle Sam is rich enough to give you all a farm!*⁶

But the hoped-for land never materialized. Lacking capital, equipment, tools, management skills, and any training except agricultural, most blacks remained in or near the place of their emancipation. They lived out their lives amid the lingering passions, personal tragedies, and economic ruin of the defeated southern states. From an economic point of view, freed slaves in the South were deprived of any assured livelihood and were set adrift in a chaos of hostility and devastation. From a political point of view, the southern black population was placed by Reconstruction in a dangerous and ultimately false position. As William Lloyd Garrison said in 1864,

*“Chattels personal may be instantly translated from the auction block into freemen; but when were they ever taken at the same time to the ballot box and invested with all political rights and immunities? According to the laws of development and progress, it is not practicable.”*⁷

Garrison's opinion demonstrates the ambivalence, which prevailed among even the most fervent abolitionists. It is little wonder that formal liberation of the southern slaves did not bring with it all the rights of citizenship. The farm labor system of today still reflects this ambivalence, as different standards are applied to this work force, which, if applied to others, would immediately be seen as unjust.

Freed women and men were unable to establish themselves as farmers or even as rural wage earners after the Civil War. Southern planters had no capital to pay regular wages, so a system of credit was devised which

permitted agricultural production to be carried on. Former slaves were allowed to remain in their cabins and work as before on land which was “let” or “rented” to them, in expectation of a share of the crops. Frequently, the “settling up” at the end of the season or the calendar year produced no cash. As likely as not, the share cropper family would find themselves in debt to the planter. In this way a permanent class of laborers was created. As southern agriculture expanded into various commercial crops, thousands of share croppers and their families went “on the stream” to supplement their wages and retain possession of the little plots which they worked. From the perspective of the people who worked the land, the postbellum South greatly resembled the antebellum South; rural slums replaced the slave quarters; the crew leader became a stand-in for the overseer.

. . . And the Hacienda System

Just as residual slavery accounts for much of the current situation of farm workers in the South, colonial California has provided the pattern for farm labor-management relations in the West and Southwest. It all began with the enormous haciendas, which had developed from the land grants made by Spain to favored, well connected individuals. After California was taken from Mexico in 1849, these huge tracts, each comprising hundreds of thousands of acres of the best agricultural land in the state, were frequently passed on intact to other favored individuals. In many instances, fraudulent deeds and “floating” grants enabled speculators to gain control of enormous areas. In 1871 in California, 500 men were the owners of 8,600,000 acres.⁸ One enterprising speculator even claimed title to the city of San Francisco. While this claim was ultimately rejected, the courts upheld most of the rest. Additional thousands of acres were granted to the railroads as alternate rights-of-way tracts. “Our land system,” said Governor Haight, “seems to be mainly

framed to facilitate the acquisition of large blocks of land by capitalists or corporations either as donations or at nominal prices.”⁹

With the completion of the transcontinental railroad and the development of refrigerated railroad cars in the 1870s, something more than wheat and cattle could be produced. There was an urgent need for hands to work labor intensive crops, which were shipped to population centers back East. Large scale, “Bonanza” farming had arrived. And with its arrival there had to be found or created a new class of people. Thomas Jefferson’s idealistic picture of the noble freeholders - a portrait which continues to represent the American farmer in the popular mind - has nothing in common with the requirements of the enormous California ranches of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In order to be economically sound, these operations have depended upon the services of thousands of workers, imported and exported with the change of the seasons.

Farm Labor: A Rainbow Coalition

From the point of view of the native population of California the tidal wave of Anglo immigration amounted to a genocidal occupation of the Indian world. By the 1860s the indigenous laborers, who had worked the non-commercial Spanish haciendas were no longer available. In the absence of Indian farm workers, Chinese laborers, who had been imported to build the railroads, were brought into the fields. Even though the Chinese demonstrated great skill in the physically demanding jobs in the fields, and even though there is some evidence that the Chinese workers actually taught the California rancher a great deal about the art of cultivation, this arrangement could not last.¹⁰

Jobs were scarce for the Anglo settlers who were drawn to California by gold fever and the various other fevers which caused hundreds of thousands of people to

walk across a continent. Anti-Chinese proposals became more and more attractive to the politicians of the period. Ordinances were passed which attempted to regulate or exclude Chinese people. In 1882, Congress responded by passing the first immigration exclusion act.¹¹

The Depression of 1893 drove thousands of previously employed Anglo workers to the point of destitution. In rural California, homeless “settlers” often found themselves competing for jobs in the fields with “coolies.” By the end of 1893, racial hostility had reached a murderous pitch. Thousands of Chinese were forced off their jobs and out of rural California by rioters who raided the fields and set fire to labor camps. The riots, which were motivated by racial exclusivism and which occurred throughout the agricultural areas of the state, permanently eliminated Chinese workers from the farm labor picture.

The loss of these workers fueled a debate which was already underway in west coast agricultural circles before the turn of the century.¹² The debate centered upon the issue of recruitment for the enormous commercial enterprises which had replaced the wheat farms of the post-Civil War era. The rigid economies of agribusiness required only a small year-round work force, but approximately ten times that number for a few weeks every year. Among the employers were those who advocated a labor procurement program with a social purpose - an invocation of the Jeffersonian ideal of the sturdy and independent farmer. It was argued that the solution to the grower’s labor problems was the large scale recruitment of “the farmer lads of the agricultural districts of the Eastern States,” who would both work the land and also help to populate the sparse agricultural regions of the state.¹³ An advocate of this kind of labor recruitment program argued that “an intelligent, thrifty, energetic, steady, young white man who was raised on a farm can do more work than any laborer a fruit-grower can secure.”¹⁴

Meanwhile, the same dogma of racial supremacy had led agricultural employers in the South to the opposite

conclusion. Not only were people of color desirable farm workers, they were peculiarly qualified for this kind of employment. John W. Dubose of Birmingham, Alabama invoked Biblical imagery, in 1886, when he spoke of the advantages of “a large body of strong, hearty, active, docile and easily contented Negro laborers, who conform to the apostolic maxim of being “contented with their wages” and [have] no disposition to strike.”¹⁵ Two years later an Alabama planter said, “White labor is totally unsuited to our methods, our manners, and our accommodations.” Who, then, is available for field work? “No other laborer [than the Negro] of whom I have any knowledge, would be as cheerful, or as contented on four pounds of meat and a peck of meal a week, in a little log cabin 14 x 16 feet, with cracks in it large enough to afford passage to a large sized cat.”¹⁶ With even more candor, another planter stated, “Give me the nigger every time. The nigger will never strike as long as you give him plenty to eat and half clothe him; he will live on less and do more hard work, when properly managed, than any other class or race of people.”¹⁷

Shortly after the turn of the century, west coast agricultural circles had ended their debates about labor procurement and abandoned any efforts to develop a socially viable labor policy. Some attempt had been made to secure Anglo workers, but these recruitment drives were half hearted at best, since they compromised a fundamental business principle, the maximization of profits. Accordingly, the industry pushed ahead in its efforts to recruit foreign labor.¹⁸ This approach brought the West Coast into conformity with the agricultural employment patterns in the South and East and coincided with American expansion overseas, particularly in the Philippines and the Caribbean. President McKinley’s attitude is typical of the racial-religious pretensions, which were fashionable in America at the turn of the century. When McKinley asked God for guidance about what to do with the Philippines, God reportedly told him, “Take them.”¹⁹

Having decided to pursue a labor recruitment program, which offered the greatest promise of profitability, but which contradicted the ideals of a few years before, agribusiness in California needed to develop a justification for the socially dysfunctional labor relations system to which it had become committed. The explanation was found in the racial myths, which are so frequently drawn upon at times of social dislocation and dissonance. Where once it was said that the best worker was the energetic and steady white farmer from the East, now it was maintained that non-white laborers are more naturally suited to field work. This is due, it was argued, to “their relatively small stature, ability to tolerate hot weather, native stoicism, and innate lack of ambition.”²⁰ In 1929, an observer noted, “stoop crops, that require much bending over, like picking strawberries or cutting asparagus, the white laborer finds particularly tiring and is unwilling to handle. Such crops naturally tend to fall to races like Orientals, accustomed to squat rather than sit.”²¹ For the past four generations, then, in the South as well as in California and the Southwest, harvesting requirements have depended upon the temporary presence of voiceless, excluded minorities, imported and then exported with the change of the seasons.

After the Chinese were excluded from the fields, Japanese, then Filipino and Mexican laborers were imported specifically for short term harvesting needs. Using their political influence and working through various associations set up for the purpose, employers saw to it that government- sponsored labor procurement programs, were set up.

The rationale which supported foreign recruitment programs tended to rule out even the possibility of hiring white workers for field work. But of course, there were significant numbers of these workers. Accordingly, an explanation for this contradiction was found in the theories of social Darwinism, which were current seventy-five years ago. It was stated that the presence of these workers in the

fields was due to natural selection. These workers were too “shiftless and irresponsible;” their “collective depravity” made them unfit for white man’s work.²² The farm labor population in the United States thus reflected the colors of the rainbow; and like a proper rainbow, should contain every color - but white.

Such notions served both to explain the existence of the non-white farm worker caste and also to blunt any criticism aimed at reform. Things could never be different, it was argued, because of the “nature” of the workers. They were unfit for any other kind of life. It followed, then, that any agitation among the workers themselves must have some other cause than a legitimate protest over deplorable conditions.

The Cry for Justice in the Fields

But there were protests, which took various forms. One of the earliest recorded work stoppages occurred in Louisiana in 1880. From the American Cyclopaedia of that year we read:

“This was not an uprising of blacks against white, but one of employees against employers, in the parishes of St. James, St. John the Baptist, and St. Charles. During the month of March, Negroes went from plantation to plantation, requiring others who had not joined their movement to desist from work and to even leave these parishes. They rode about in armed bands, broke into cabins and frightened the inmates, took quiet laborers from their work in the fields and whipped them. Louisiana’s Governor Wiltz issued a proclamation, but it had no effect on the rioters, and the militia was called out and sent to two or three points of disturbance. The ringleaders were arrested without bloodshed or difficulty and were brought to New Orleans, tried and imprisoned.”²³

On the West Coast, each successive group of farm laborers from the Chinese workers in the 1880s onward had tried to organize and had conducted strikes. But the first farm labor organizing effort to gain national attention occurred in 1913-14.

1910-1914 were years of great prosperity for agricultural employers. These were the "parity years," that period when farmers were considered to have gotten their fair income. Today, if there is a shortage or a surplus in a particular commodity, the federal government may step in and buy up crops or pay growers to reduce acreage. The object is to keep farm income near parity, that is, as near as possible to the 1914 income levels.

But the prosperity of commercial agriculture was not shared by the workers. In 1913, W. B. Durst, a hop grower in Wheatland, California, had advertised picking jobs for 2,800 workers when only 1,500 were needed. People came to Wheatland from all over the West. On one crew of 235 men, 27 nationalities were represented. The 1,000 destitute surplus workers could not move on and conditions at the camp were intolerable.

*"Tents were rented from Durst at 75 cents a week; workers were forced to use his store as he forbade local grocers to make deliveries; there were 9 outdoor toilets for 2,800 people; drinking water was not allowed in the fields, since Durst's cousin had a lemonade concession there, at 5 cents a glass; a relative also owned the lunchtime 'stew wagon.'"*²⁴

At a mass meeting in the camp, complaints and protests were loud and a sick baby was held up before the crowd. Sheriff's deputies moved into the crowd, shots were fired and a riot ensued, during which a district attorney, deputy sheriff, and two workers were killed. The national guard was called out all over California. This protest as well as subsequent ones had been led by a labor organization known as the Industrial Workers of the World. When the

I.W.W. stated its opposition to the First World War, its leadership was prosecuted under various criminal syndicalism laws, and the organization, never very stable, collapsed.

Farm Workers Excluded from NLRA Protection

The depression years brought even more hardship to the landless, migratory work force. Distress in the cities created enough pressure to pass remedial legislation, but the New Deal, which helped urban workers and farmers, had no effect upon the condition of farm workers. In fact, the National Labor Relations Act, known as the Wagner Act, was passed only after Southern legislators had been assured that agricultural workers and domestic servants would not be covered.

In the summer of 1933, there was a huge cotton surplus. The Agricultural Adjustment Act was passed that year and required that surplus cotton be plowed under in order to create scarcity and hold up prices. This policy destroyed the meager livelihoods of the sharecroppers, who could only be paid by bringing in a crop.

Clay East, a tenant farmer and early leader of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) told of his reaction to a government agent who asked him what he thought. "I really blew up . . . he was asking me if I approved of people in rags with no sheets in the house plowing under cotton."²⁵ When the mules avoided stepping on the cotton which they were made to plow up, the tenants said, "Mules have more sense than men."²⁶ The union attempted to protest the deliberate destruction of the cotton crop by organizing cotton pickers, black and white, but the STFU was defeated by the weight of hostile government and community reaction, augmented by vigilantes, who broke up meetings and harassed local leaders. The STFU never succeeded in signing any contracts in agriculture.

Without the protective umbrella which NLRA coverage would have provided, farm labor organizing efforts could not succeed. However, the effort was made, especially in California, to organize the Dust Bowl immigrants from the central plains. In 1933 major strikes occurred in the Imperial Valley, the Salinas Valley and the great central valley of the San Joaquin, under the direction of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers International Union. The goal of this activity was to drive up depression wages and secure contracts. However, the strike leaders were arrested and sent to prison for violations of the state criminal syndicalism law while paramilitary Committees of Vigilance, which had come into existence in California as early as the 1850s, used threats and outright terror against the workers. Most notable of these vigilantes were the Associated Farmers, who were brutally successful in their efforts to discourage farm workers from organizing a union.²⁷

The Bracero Program (1942-1964)

The Second World War created jobs in west coast war production industries for many of the Anglo Dust Bowl immigrants. Their place was taken in the fields by “*braceros*,” laborers imported from Mexico under government contract. The importation programs were continued on a “temporary” basis for twenty years after WWII, justified by assertions of agricultural employers and the certification of the Secretary of Labor that “domestic” workers were unavailable or unwilling to do the work.

Worker importation programs had a devastating effect upon both farm workers and small farmers. In the words of Linda Lewis Tooni,

“With this cheap labor supply, the huge corporate farms not only depressed conditions for domestic workers, but also undercut small farmers in the marketplace by producing crops requiring more intensive

labor more cheaply than they could. California's share of agricultural production rose at the expense of everyone except the corporate farmers. The evils that result when the power is all on one side in a labor situation are nowhere more clearly demonstrated than here, where growers were able to secure large-scale government assistance in obtaining cheap foreign labor, while domestic farm workers had no voice powerful enough to defend their right to their jobs and livelihood.” ²⁸

Wages in agriculture on the West Coast were frozen for years because of the presence of braceros, who could not negotiate effectively for increases. Braceros were frequently used as strikebreakers against domestic workers, who found it impossible to organize or negotiate with their employers when there existed such a convenient source of cheap, manageable labor. Much the same picture existed - and still exists - in Florida and along the East Coast, where workers are imported under government supervision from Jamaica and Puerto Rico. Finally, in 1964, after years of protest by the labor movement, community and church groups, the Bracero Program was ended on the West Coast, and the way was cleared for the most successful farm labor organizing effort in history, an effort which was encouraged and supported by church workers who were closest to the farm workers, the California Migrant Ministry.

Farm Workers and the Protestant Churches

By and large, the response to the situation of farm workers by caring people - who are not themselves farm workers - can be placed on a continuum. The response begins with (1) sympathetic concern, focused on direct services to individuals followed by (2) agitation for remedial legislation, which in turn has been followed by (3) formal support for collective bargaining within the agricultural industry. This pattern can be seen both in the

careers of individuals as well as in the developing work of Protestant migrant ministry programs.

In the 1920s the plight of farm workers came to the attention of Protestant church people, who responded in a systematic way. Under the leadership of church women in New Jersey, child care centers were established in eight labor camps.²⁹ Soon the work had expanded to other eastern states. Migrant Ministries, both denominational and ecumenical, began to take shape. For the next thirty years the programs of the various Migrant Ministries were refined, focusing largely upon labor camp visitation programs, recreational activities for the children, Sunday School classes and worship services. By the 1940s, still under the leadership of church women, Migrant Ministry programs existed in twenty-five states. The nationwide effort to develop and sustain a formal church presence with farm workers was being coordinated by the National Migrant Committee of the Home Mission Council of North America. The Home Mission Council came under the sponsorship of the then-new Division of Home Missions of the National Council of Churches in 1950.

Denominational outreach to farm workers was similar to the ecumenical Migrant Ministries, with the emphasis upon labor camp visitation. Clothing and food were distributed, and, in those areas where the migrant workers “wintered,” there were special Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas parties for the children. At least one Migrant Ministry in the ‘50s made an effort, pathetic though it was, not to humiliate the people; toys were given first to the parents, who could then pass them on to the children.

But very little changed for farm workers as a result of all of this activity. The caste of laborers, “marked by the color badge of servitude,”³⁰ remained in their poverty, powerlessness, and isolation. From the New Deal onward there had been a parade of federal and state commissions which studied the situation, suggested remedies (restrictions on child labor, regulation of labor contractors,

licensing of labor camps, increases in agricultural wages, inclusion of farm workers under workers compensation, inspection of crew buses, etc.) and then were disbanded. The staff of the various Migrant Ministries, working harder by the 1950s on remedial legislation, began to express their own frustration at the failure of politicians to address the plight of these workers and their families.³¹

Of course the people of the Migrant Ministry could not be at every camp. At best, their accidental presence could offer hope of only a temporary redress or improvement. Even those activities which focus upon remedial legislation tend to hint at patronizing agenda-setting: middle class people attempting to determine and win support for legislation directly affecting not themselves, but a deprived economic class, which is too weak to advocate for its own interests.

The collective bargaining process offers an important advantage in this respect, which is that the farm workers themselves, together with their employers, may take primary responsibility for this process and also for addressing and correcting defective labor/management relations. However, support for collective bargaining for farm labor unfortunately carries a great burden. In most parts of the United States, farm workers are as voiceless on this topic as they are on any other. And the agricultural industry is bitterly resistant to collective bargaining for farm workers because collective bargaining is an approach, which lays the ax to the root of the agribusiness labor-procurement system. Hostility to collective bargaining for farm workers is the cornerstone of agribusiness political activity in California today. The industry is mobilizing itself to weaken both the language as well as the administration of the state's landmark Agricultural Labor Relations Act. The only law of its kind, the ALBA mandates secret ballot elections and good faith bargaining to settle labor-management disputes.

It is at the point of transition from direct service and/or remedial solutions to empowerment where the

middle class Christian is confronted with an acute dilemma. Standing with farm workers very likely means standing against the most influential individuals within the local church. For this reason, many churches are willing to offer financial support for direct service programs for farm workers but will have nothing to do with any program which is focused upon the empowerment of farm workers themselves.

Such a dilemma says much about the setting in life of many Christian churches today, which exist far from the periphery of society where human needs are the greatest. Even those denominations whose history is one of official dissent and repression at the hands of governmental authority are today very secure as to their finances and their respectable standing in the community. In this setting, the subject of collective bargaining for farm labor is hot indeed.

Still, the people of the Migrant Ministry found themselves drawn along by their concern for the human beings who appeared seasonally on the edges of their communities, moving from one rural slum to another, carrying their children and all their possessions with them. In spite of the risks, the churchmen and churchwoman of the Migrant Ministries, who love and serve their religious institutions, were compelled to ask and then try to answer a still recurring question: what needs to be done to *change permanently* the situation of farm workers in America?

Early, groping attempts to suggest answers can be traced in the back issues of *Western Harvest* published by the Migrant Ministry in California.³² In 1949, there was no mention at all of the widely publicized strike at the DiGeorgio Corporation in Arvin, California; but in a later issue a San Joaquin cotton strike was reported as a news item, with favorable mention made of the increase in wages which the strike had won. By the late 50's, the newsletter was running articles entitled "Getting At the Roots," and publishing pictures of farm workers, mostly of *men*. Since the emphasis was no longer exclusively upon charitable

activities, there was no need to focus upon women and children - as though there were no men in the work force at all.

The staff of the Migrant Ministry began to seek exposure to farm labor groups. In the rural counties of California, Migrant Ministry staff, who had some training in community organizing, began to join with labor and community groups in lobbying for increased services for farm workers, instead of trying to provide assistance through church channels.³³ In 1960, *Western Harvest* made mention of “collective bargaining legislation” for farm workers.

The stage was set for a new phase in the work of the Migrant Ministry: explicit, direct support for farm workers who were attempting to build their own union and take part in collective bargaining with their employers. With the end of the Bracero program in 1964, this union building effort could begin.

1965-1970 Controversy and Recognition

In the spring of 1965, Filipino grape picking crews successfully struck for higher wages in the Coachella Valley of southern California. As the harvesting season moved north, the strike moved with it. In Delano, located in the great central valley, the Filipino workers continued their strike, which would be broken if Mexican crews did not join them.³⁴

After initial hesitation and considerable discussion about strategy and timing, the Mexican crews voted to join the Filipinos on the picket line. For the Migrant Ministry, these events marked a change, a transformation in the way denominations and churches would be related to farm labor. Throughout the strike, which lasted through that season and several subsequent harvests, the staff of the California Migrant Ministry traveled up and down the state seeking financial support for the strikers, explaining farm labor issues from the workers’ perspective and arguing

forcefully that at least some part of the church needs to be present with workers who are seeking redress and greater control over their own lives.

From the CMM newsletter, June, 1965:

“Verbal truth telling is inadequate. Our deeds already speak louder than our words. The oppressed people of our society (farm workers among them) are alienated from our message for they see the Church as part of an established order which has kept them weak and poor and promises to do the same to their children.

Evangelism is tough business. It is not to be spoken of lightly. It requires faithful witness which must mean taking our suffering brother seriously - seriously enough to be there with him, listen to his pain, to share our pain with him, to serve justice even when it is costly. The task is enough to humble us, to unite us and keep us busy for the days to come.” ³⁵

This stance shattered the largely rural church constituency, which had supported the Migrant Ministry in its charitable activities. But through much hard work and many hours of meetings and talking with church people across the state of California, a new constituency was found in the urban areas. The California Migrant Ministry was able to sustain its funding, enlarge its staff, and, in 1971, transform itself into the National Farm Worker Ministry. Since then, the NFWM has stood with farm workers across the country, who are organizing their own union and seeking negotiations and contracts with agricultural employers. Throughout the 70s and 80s the NFWM has encouraged support for consumer boycott efforts, which farm workers have mounted against the products of companies who have been resistant to collective bargaining. Through effective, selfless organizing efforts, the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) has negotiated dozens of contracts which have increased wages and provided for health care and job security for thousands of

farm workers in California. The Union also has a contract covering the citrus workers of Coca Cola in Florida.

At last, after many generations, the pattern of abuse and exclusion has begun to change for farm workers in America. And one small part of the church, at least, has been there with them and will continue to be there in the years ahead.

Racial Exclusivism and the Christian Faith

The situation of farm workers in America is symptomatic of the distressing and pervasive impact of racial exclusivism within our culture. I have attempted to show how this ideology has played a role in farm labor relations - both as a response to and as an argument against justice for farm workers.

However, against the ideology and the practice of racial exclusivism, the Christian faith offers a decisive rebuttal. Simply stated, racism in any form is not compatible with the faith that we profess. For this reason, the continuing distress of farm workers in the South and West is both a human condition of suffering which demands redress and also a moral dilemma confronting the churches of the nation. An argument can be made that the Christians of the South face a particularly compelling challenge in this respect.

On the whole, church organizations have not adequately addressed the economic motives or the racial justifications, which have determined the shape of labor-management relations in commercial agriculture. All too often, appeals from farm workers or from the people of the Migrant Ministry are met by indifference or even hostility by many within the churches who indicate that "the church" should be "neutral" in labor-management disputes. A posture of non-involvement is too easily given a borrowed dignity with the Pauline theme of reconciliation. Silent acquiescence to economic power does no credit to the liberating Gospel of Christ.

Time and again, Paul the Apostle to the “*ethne*” (*the peoples* or *the nations*; or better, anybody and everybody) insisted that neither racial nor ethnic differences nor divergent religious or cultural practice should become a condition for entrance into the house-churches he established.³⁶ Repeatedly he urged his converts not to permit racial exclusivism to determine their relations with one another; the God Paul serves is the Creator of all there is. “Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3). “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). “For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor un-circumcision is of any avail - but faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

We do well to keep in view the cosmic horizons of our faith, which Paul stresses with great force, especially in Romans.³⁷ Indeed, we do possess a socio-political mandate to renew and transform God’s world “. . . *for the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and receive the splendid liberation of the children of God.*” (Rom. 8:21)

NOTES

1. Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest, A History of California Farm Workers, 1870-1941*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 15.
2. Quoted in Robert Coles, *Uprooted Children*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 65.
3. Current literature detailing farm labor conditions is extensive. See Ronald L. Goldfarb, *A Caste of Despair* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1981); Statements by Jerome Cohen, et al., *Farm Worker Collective Bargaining*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979, pp. 142-143; Ronald B. Taylor, *Sweatshops in the Sun* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); "Promises to Keep: The Continuing Crisis in the Education of Migrant Children," National Child Labor Committee, 1972; Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, Subcommittee on Health and Subcommittee on Migratory Labor, *Joint Hearings*, 1972; "Migrant Farm Workers in North Carolina," Report by the Migrant Ministry Committee, North Carolina Council of Churches (Raleigh, 1982); Jacques Levy, *Cesar Chavez, Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975). For an excellent bibliography of materials published before 1974, see Beverly Fodell, *Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, A Selective Bibliography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), 104 pages.
4. [Note written in 1984] Congress is presently working on a major immigration bill. Known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Bill, the measure is a mixed bag of provisions, which indicates the uncertainty with which our immigrant nation addresses this issue. Passed by the House and the Senate in two different forms, the measure was opposed in this election year by both presidential candidates. Its chief sponsors do not represent areas greatly impacted by immigrants but suggest the bill will help mainly Hispanic immigrants. However, Simpson-Mazzoli is opposed by most Hispanic organizations. The bill contains complicated

documentation procedures for unregistered aliens as well as a provision reinstating a farm worker importation program, which was terminated and discredited twenty years ago. Touted as an attempt to “regain control” of the nation’s southern border, the bill mandates no additional funds to accomplish this and appears to be little more than an effort to restore greater control to employers over agricultural workers.

5. Marcus Cunliffe, *George Washington, Man and Monument* (New York: New American Library, 1982), p. 104.
6. *With These Hands, Women Working on the Land*, edited by Joan M. Jensen (New York: The Feminist Press, McGraw Hill, 1981), p. 96.
7. Quoted in C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (New York: Random House, 1960), pp. 89-90.
8. Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field* (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1971), p. 20.
9. Ibid. p. 21.
10. Ibid. p. 71.
11. See McWilliams, *ibid.* pp. 66-80 and also *California, The Great Exception* (New York: A. A. Wyn, 1949), pp. 127-170.
12. Daniel, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-70.
13. Ibid., P. 51.
14. Ibid., P. 52.
15. Quoted in C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 221.
16. A. W. S. Daniel, quoted in Woodward, *ibid.*, p. 208.
17. Ibid., p. 208. The speaker is not identified.
18. Daniel, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-70.
19. President McKinley in an 1898 address to ministers at the White House: “I went down on my knees and thanked to God Almighty for light and guidance. And late one night it came to me this way. I don’t know how it was but it came There was nothing left to do but take them all and to educate the Filipinos and civilize and Christianize them . . .

- .” Quoted in Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York, Harper and Row, 1980), pp. 305-306.
20. Daniels, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
 21. Edward L Munson, “Solving the Farm Labor Problem in California,” *Overland Monthly*, May, 1929, P. 37.
 22. Daniel, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
 23. Quoted in H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land* (Montclair: Allanheld Osmun, 1979), pp. 284-285.
 24. Linda Lewis Tooni, *Farm Labor Organizing, 1905-1967* (New York: National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, 1967), p. 13.
 25. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
 27. Daniel, *op. cit.*, p. 141; also McWilliams, *Factories*, *ibid.*, pp. 211-229.
 28. Tooni, *op. cit.*, p., 35.
 29. For the outline of church work with farm workers, 1920 to the 1980s, I have drawn upon the files of the National Farm Worker Ministry. II I-A Fairmont Avenue, Oakland, CA 94611.
 30. Beard, Charles A. and Mary B. Beard, *Basic History of the United States* (New York: Doubleday, 1944), p. 288.
 31. After working behind the scenes with Congressmen Richard Nixon, Thomas Werdel, and Thruston Morton to discredit a fledgling farm labor organizing effort in 1950, Congressman Tom Steed was unusually candid. Sympathy for farm workers, he said, “was just the wrong view for me, and certainly wasn’t the sort of thing I could go along with and still expect to survive politically in my district.” Quoted in Ernesto Galarza, *Spiders in the House and Workers in the Field* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 160.
 32. See note 29.
 33. Carl Tjerandsen, *Education for Citizenship, A Foundation’s Experience* (1980: Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, 425 Miramar Drive, Santa Cruz, CA 95060), pp. 439-447. This book is a report from the Foundation “on

what it did with the funds at its disposal and on what results were observed.” The book belongs in every seminary and university library and is available *free of charge*.

34. For the history of the Delano strike, see John Gregory Dunne, *Delano, The Story of the California Grape Strike* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967).
35. The *California Migrant Ministry Newsletter* was the successor to *Western Harvest*.
36. Rom. 14; I Cor. 7:17-20; I Cor. 8; I Cor. 9:19-23; 2 Coy. 3:17; Cal. 5:1, 6, 13-15.
37. Especially but not exclusively Rom. 1.14-2:11, 5:1-6; 8:18-39.