

Faith And Farming Speaker

Editor's Note:

As reported last week, the Mennonite church held a special seminar in interest of the current agricultural, financial and farm family displacement problem. Held at the Laurelville Mennonite Church Center in western Pennsylvania, the seminar was titled Faith and Farming III. Howard Brenneman, former President of the Hesston Corporation, was a keynote speaker.

In part one of the two-part series, Brenneman outlined his thoughts on where agriculture has come from and why the present crisis exists. This week in part two we report Brenneman's ideas on where agriculture is going and his answer to some of the needs of the inevitable displacement of families off the farm.

Here's Part II of "The Renaissance of North American Agriculture." Keynote address by Howard Brenneman.

There is a whole lot of land out there to lease. I tell the people coming out of ag college now is the best time to go into agriculture. I know. You couldn't possibly come out of college unless you had a rich father or a rich father in law or whatever in the '70s and get into agriculture. The premium was too high. But the premium is pretty low right now. One man's misfortune may be another guy's fortune. That's just the way life is. It's cruel. It's terrible. We have to deal with it as a church. By the way we're starting to deal with that as a church. I know the Aveys and other people are dealing with it, but we still got a long way to come in terms of how we deal with that and the whole thing of making it acceptable for people to do deal with it.

We're seeing export markets come back slightly. They are going to improve a little bit, not very much. Don't depend on exporting our way out of this thing. We're going to have to get quality improvement in our grain that we're shipping. We're going to have to ship more quality grain.

Consolidation is inevitable. I didn't say that every farm is going to be big. I didn't say every farm is going to be small. There are going

to be two kinds of farmers. One that's very big, and one that may be is very small. There are not going to be very many in between. Twelve percent of the farmers now produce 67 percent of the cash receipts. Five percent of the farmers by 1990 or 1991 are going to produce 85 percent of it. You're going to see very large people. You're going to see very small people. Either way you're going to make money. But you're going to have a terrible time in between. The time a farmer putting out his corn crop and harvesting it and going to south Texas or his wheat crop and doing that probably if you have all your land paid for and all that, you're going to be able to do it.

You're going to see emergence specialized farming. I saw it in the room tonight, different specialized crops. I can tell you for sure beyond the shadow of a doubt that not everybody is going to be able to raise all the corn, soybean and wheat they want to. No way. And the quicker we break that system, the better off we're going to be because the government has no where to go with these crops. We're only fooling ourselves. All over western Europe they're doing the same thing. There is no where to go with all this milk, cheese, corn and wheat. We're going to have to figure out other crops to grow. We're going to have to beat other people in specialty crops that we're bringing in to where our imports exceeded our exports in agriculture. The reason that is all the specialty crops coming into this country that we need to produce in this country. They're going to be more labor intensive. You're going to have to do different things with your labor.

There are going to be fewer dealers. I know in your town you've seen it happen. It's going to continue to happen. They're going to go down to be where there are only 4,000 or 5,000 dealers in the United States. That's all that you can possibly support. There will be fewer manufacturers. You haven't seen all the consolidation yet. I know you've seen Ford join New Holland or New Holland join Ford. I know you've seen Case and IH. I know you've seen Versatile trying

to join Deere. Stieger just joined Case and IH. You're going to see more yet. There is not room for that many big manufacturers. I'm not going to predict who is going to be the next one. The next one and some combination are going to go together very quickly. That's all I can tell you. It won't be long until you read more.

Something intriguing for people who are excited about agriculture and the young engineers coming out of school and the entrepreneurs, and particularly people who love to work with their hands either with the soil or equipment. There is going to be a re-emergence of a lot of small nitch companies. You're seeing it. You're going to see more of it. You know people are getting laid off in the city. General Motors doesn't need as many people. Deere doesn't need as many people. Hesston doesn't need as many people. A lot of those people are excited about agriculture. They're going to figure out in their head if we go to work and we form a venture here and we produce the specialized product for a specialized geographical part of the United States and we take out some of the middle men in this thing, we can produce a product again and have a nice little factory of 100 or 50 people or whatever. You're going to see that springing up. You're seeing spring up right now. You're going to have either the big or the small. You're going to have a lot of opportunities for young people to go into service and dealerships. Not dealerships the way we think of them today because the dealerships are going to be large. A lot of those dealers aren't handling service properly. There is going to be specialized service opportunities for your children and mine if they want to stay in agriculture. They want to really be innovative and go back to work.

But I see in a nutshell that all of the seeds are being sewed in the '80s to make the '90s very productive in agriculture. I didn't say they'd be very profitable. I didn't say you'd get rich over night in land. That may only happen once in a lifetime. If you sold right, you're rich. If you didn't, you

didn't have it in the first place. I didn't say any of those things. But what I did say is that there is going to be a re-emergence of a highly productive North American agriculture. Fewer people, yes.

1936 we probably peaked in agriculture. Employment today we down to less than probably two percent of the national population very quickly.

If we once get through, and we get into our system the idea that we're going through a renaissance. When you go through a renaissance, you go through a dark age. I sure hate to see rural America and a lot of towns in western Kansas fold and all those things. But it's inevitable. Believe me, people, a lot of that was built on irrigation, on high price land and all those kind of things in western Nebraska. It's not economical. Those towns were wonderful. Those school systems were wonderful. It was a fantastic way to raise children. Tomorrow is different than yesterday. The people that set out there and hope that tomorrow is coming is back or yesterday is coming back tomorrow will die on the vine.

What we as a church need to do is have a great deal of empathy. Maybe not a great deal of sympathy. Those words are very tricky. Sympathy will not bring the situation around for people to realize what they have to deal with and all of that. In other words, for you and I to sit with them and say, "Isn't it too bad. It's terrible." You can do that for a little while when you have to do that to get through that. The next thing is empathy. Empathy is to take that person by the hand and help them readjust themselves into a future life. That is the tough part. That might even cost you out of your pocket book. Sympathy is cheap. You can go the corner coffee shop and sympathize all you want to. You need to do that. Don't get that wrong. But empathy comes with an expensive price tag. If you really empathize with the people that have been forced into this transition, many times, not of their own doing but of world circumstances, and sure some of it was by their own decisions but those decisions looked good. If you really em-

pathize with them, then that means you have to dig into your pocket book. Or you have to dig into your personal life. You have to dig into your emotional life. You have to begin to live with them and help them get repotted. Help them face life in the future.

I am not near as positive yet about how we're working through the problems of those that are going to get displaced. I know we're doing all the right things. I know the Aveys, the Cornelsons and these kind of people are doing all the right things. But somehow we have a philosophy in the church that we built in. It was a great philosophy. But at these kind of times it doesn't serve us very well that "if you're good, you'll prosper". The reverse side of that philosophy is that if you're not good, you're not going to prosper. That isn't said, but that's felt. We have to somehow be able to get our empathy out and to quit pointing fingers and saying well if you hadn't made that decision and that decision, you wouldn't be where you're at today. If Hesston Corporation hadn't made this decision and this decision I might not be standing up here today either.

That's beside the point. What we have to do is deal with reality. Somehow we as a church are going to have to make people feel important and good and worth something even if they had a failure. Their farm failed. They didn't fail.

They have made a decision here and there that helped cause their farm to fail. Who hasn't done that. Some of us who didn't make those decisions were lucky. Some of us were prudent business people. But there is no where in the scriptures I find anywhere that says that if you do everything good, you'll prosper. And likewise your failure. Somehow we need to deal with that.

So what has to happen. Prices have to drop. Corn is the same way. Soybeans are becoming the same way. Some of that inflation that went into the land has to come out. When they told you there is only so much land so you better buy it today it's going to be higher tomorrow, somebody didn't know

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