



OPINION

Food, the Ultimate Economic Power

The nation's producers for years have known that concentration in agriculture had permeated every notch of the food chain, affecting opportunities from production inputs to global trade. But according to Erika Hovland writing in the March issue of National Farmers Union News, a new study for the first time documents the highly complex web of relationships among the major players in the food sector, offering a glimpse into the future of the industry and the threat it poses to America's system of independently operated farms and ranches.

"When you look at the acquisitions firms make and their working relationships—joint ventures, alliances, side agreements—you see that a large number of these firms are connected to a lot of others and you say 'Now wait a minute. Just how much competition is there out there?' It certainly isn't what we think of as a lot of independent firms out there competing in the marketplace," said the study's author, Dr. William Heffernan, a professor of rural sociology at the University of Missouri.

The study shows how an explosion in the new types of working relationships among companies has led to the formation of a complex corporate family tree—a network of firms organized into "clusters" that control the food system from the gene to the supermarket shelf. The industry's three major clusters—Cargill/Monsanto, ConAgra, and Novartis/ADM—are loosely based on the same formula: they link interests in biotechnology, grain trading and processing, and meat production and processing to form a nearly complete food chain.

It's the sheer complexity of this emerging structure that raises red flags about the true degree of market competition in the industry. The elaborate nature of the relationships between firms reduces transparency, and means that even if a company does not hold a majority share of a specific market, it may still have great decision-making power within the food chain. It's that kind of penetration that makes the effect of the web of alliances so difficult to measure.

The ramifications of the emerging "cluster" system are far-reaching for producers, rural America, and for the nation's consumers.

"One of the most troubling implications is the threat to farmer's independence," NFU President Leland Swenson told lawmakers at a recent House Agriculture Committee hearing. "The dominance of a few major firms limits a producer's ability to earn a fair return. But the new structure also is bringing a major shift in decision-making from independent producers to just a handful of corporate executives," he said.

A related theme running through the study is how the new trend toward corporate "families" may transform the role of a producer from a manager into a laborer. And technological advances, such as the so-called terminator gene and precision farming, are accelerating this process. Biotechnology and the terminator gene have put farmers at the mercy of the "cluster" that patents the seed, leaving open the possibility that producers in the future may never even own the commodities they grow. Moreover, precision farming's global positioning system separates management from production by making it possible for "managers" in distant offices to make day-to-day decisions about the farm, while producers are simply hired hands.

But farmer's aren't the only ones who will feel the pinch. "Rural communities also lose out because corporate returns routinely are reinvested in the firm, rather than in local economies where the goods are produced," Swenson noted.

There are concerns that the movement toward a privately centralized food system may put U.S. food security in great jeopardy. "Congress needs to start asking the tough questions to determine what direction the industry should be taking, and whether it's wise to continue to allow consolidation to go on unchecked," said Swenson.

Some argue the proliferation of alliances, marketing agreements and partnerships between firms in agriculture is simply following a natural trend seen in other industries. But as Heffernan points out, "These are issues of food and not just agriculture and rural problems... Food is a necessity, and it is needed on a regular basis. Those who control the global food system have the ultimate in economic power."



Now Is The Time

By John Schwartz

Lancaster County
Agricultural Agent

To Recycle Pesticide Containers

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture will collect pesticide containers for recycling. Containers must be cleaned before they will be accepted. During the months of May, June and July, farmers may drop off clean pesticide containers at locations in selected counties on certain dates.

All plastic pesticide containers must be triple rinsed or pressure rinsed and free of all visible products (inside and outside) in order to be accepted for recycling. Only HDPE#2 plastic containers will be accepted. All containers (55 gallons or smaller) will be accepted whole.

Bulk tanks will be accepted only if cut in manageable pieces. Large drums and bulk tanks must also be triple or pressure rinsed in order to be accepted. Only plastic containers that held pesticides, crop oils, surfactants, sanitizers or fertilizer are acceptable. Other plastic containers (anti freeze, motor oil, laundry or dish detergents, milk bottles, etc.) will not be accepted.

Containers may only be dropped off at an open and attended site. The department will examine all containers at the drop off site. Unclean containers will be returned to the owner. For further information contact your county cooperative extension office or The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture at 717-787-5206.

To Pay Yourself First

Adapt P.Y.F. (Pay Yourself First) as your new motto. Dr. Robert Thee, Lancaster County Extension Housing and Resource Management Agent, recommends you take ten percent of your take home pay each month and save it. The earlier you begin this practice, the sooner it will become a habit. Paying yourself first means you delay your satisfaction of meeting today's needs and wants and using these funds to satisfy tomorrow's needs and wants.

Paying yourself first means that. Before spending any of your income, a portion of it will be set aside for the future. The savings will grow into an investment fund in which money works for the family by earning interest, then the savings and interest earned is available to achieve future income.

To Start Saving

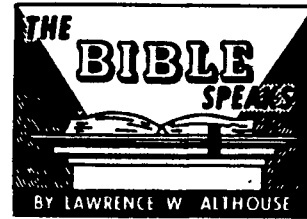
When it comes to saving money for the future, retirement saving usually is put on the back burner, and falls behind paying day to day bills and other big ticket items like replacing a car, according to Dr. Robert Thee, Lancaster County Extension Housing and Resource Management Agent.

But saving for retirement should begin as early as possible. Look at your household budget. Can you trim your personal spending in order to save for retirement? Perhaps cutting back on eating out, buying clothes, taking vacations and paying for services you could do yourself will yield some dollars for savings.

Some people view retirement as a welcomed extended vacation,

without money worries. But often retirees are faced with trying to make ends meet on an inadequate monthly income from Social Security and their savings. The need to build your retirement nest egg is vital to give your investments adequate time to grow.

Feather Prof's Footnote
"Happiness is not a state to arrive at but rather, a manner of traveling"



IS 'SEEING' 'BELIEVING'?

April 11, 1999

Background Scripture:

John 20:19-29

Devotional Reading:

Mark 9:14-24

I've always thought that the Apostle Thomas has gotten a 'bum rap' from many people who have judged him from the comfort and safety of 20/20 hindsight. Without justification, I believe, he has been saddled with that unfortunate sobriquet, 'Doubting Thomas' and held as a negative example of how not to respond to the Good News.

Then, in John 11:16, when Jesus resolves to go to Jerusalem, Thomas' response is one of both pessimism and intense loyalty and courage. In John 14:5, when Jesus assumes that the disciples know the 'way to the Father's house,' Thomas alone is humble and honest enough to confess that he doesn't know what Jesus is talking about. Are we to assume he was the only one who didn't 'know'?

Consider Jesus' reaction to Thomas on these two occasions. He was not angry, impatient or disappointed with Thomas. In fact, his expressed doubts gave Jesus the opportunity to clarify what he was saying. When, at last, Thomas does understand, he is one of the most loyal disciples

THE OTHER ELEVEN

We need to look at the other eleven apostles on the night when Jesus first appeared to them. Were they a group of fervent believers waiting for Jesus to appear? No, John tells us they were meeting behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews" (What fears put us behind closed doors?) They were in hiding when "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" Having heard those words, did they jump up and greet him joyfully? John doesn't say that. Instead he says that Jesus then showed them "his hands and his side" "Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord" (20:20).

Notice, too, Jesus' message: "Peace be with you." Twice he says this because he knows that shattered by sorrow and despair, they have been without peace in their hearts (20:19, 21). Is that not what we often need to hear him say to us, too? "Peace be with you"? Most of the negativity that haunts my life comes from fear. And fear often manifests itself as hostility, faithlessness, and despair. I have no quarrel with those who con-

stantly pray to be saved from the Devil. For me, it is enough to be saved from my fears. With Christ's peace in my heart the Devil doesn't stand a chance.

When Thomas enters the room where the rest are in hiding, they tell him, "We have seen the Lord." It is then that Thomas speaks those words that have marked him through the centuries: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the marks of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (20:25)

Once again Thomas is open enough to admit his doubts. What the other apostles were asking him to believe was the very thing that up until his appearance before them they had not believed either! The consequences of this belief are profound: **Jesus was crucified, buried, but he has risen from the grave and was here with us!** That is so earthshaking in its implications that no one ought to accept it simply because someone else says "We have seen the Lord."

"UNLESS I SEE..."

Their experience can open the door and point the way for us, but each of us must be able to say with Thomas, "Unless I see... I will not believe." The resurrection of Jesus can mean nothing to any of us unless we too can say that in some way we also have 'seen' the Lord. The resurrection is too vital, of too great consequence, for us to accept it as a second-hand belief.

Jesus appears to the apostles again, but this time Thomas is with them. Instead of rebuking Thomas for his reaction to the report of his fellow apostles, Jesus invites him to actually touch his wounds. Note that John does not tell us that "Thomas accepted Jesus' invitation. Apparently, without touching Jesus' wounds, Thomas personally believes he too has seen the Lord and, quite unlike his fellow apostles on their first encounter with the risen Christ, he exclaims, "My Lord and my God!"

Still not rebuking Thomas, Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (20:29). We do not have to 'see' Jesus physically, but we do have to encounter him spiritually and, when we have, we join Thomas in proclaiming, "My Lord and my God!"

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