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Editorial

The Glow of Truth

*There's a city of light 'mid the stars, we are told,
Where they know not a sorrow or care...*

The words of this beautiful old hymn snap our minds to attention. We envision a city in which “the gates are of pearl and the streets are of gold,” enshrouded in a soft, yet intensive light. Being a stellar city, or as Jesus says, “a city that is set on a hill,” the glow of that light can be seen from afar off.

Until approximately a hundred years ago, cities were illuminated by lamp light, in some cases, thousands or tens of thousands of individual lamps burning some sort of oil. Although the light produced by many small flames wasn't as intense as that of present day electrical lights, many weary travelers surely hastened their step as they saw the beckoning glow in the distance.

The glow of the city *'mid the stars* comes neither from burning lamps or electrical lights. It is a celestial glow, the glow of truth, which has shown since the beginning of time.

Truth, in its pristine sense, is more than mere honesty. It is more than saying yea when the answer should be yea, and nay when it should be nay. Truth is *the way, the truth, and the life*. In a word, truth is the light of eternal life.

Truth has always existed and will always exist. Truth is not dependent on man's faithfulness; is not destroyed by his unfaithfulness. Yet the Lord has chosen the lamps of faithful men and women as the recipients for truth on earth. Thus, there have been times when there were only *seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal*, and at times less, as in the days of Noah. Yet we can be assured that never since Creation has the light of truth failed to shine through the faithful.

To be a lamp, a carrier of the truth, means being a son of God; it means being saved. To merely see the glow of this light, no matter from how close up, but not possess a lamp,

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is not salvation. Nevertheless, those who live in the glow of the light of truth are able to reap temporal benefits. This is especially true of nations.

Rare indeed today would be the nation that lives in total darkness, in which there is not even a faint glow of truth (other than for the possible glow of nature). The globalization of information, especially through mass media, has cast at least a pallid glow on most peoples.

History teaches us that the degree of civilization of a nation is directly proportional to its exposure to and assimilation of the glow of truth. This would explain the atmosphere of abject terror and the atrocities committed by peoples who for centuries lunged about in utter darkness with no regard for human life or dignity.

We don't know how God contemplates nations in which there is no glow of truth, in which government—if, indeed, it can be called that—is basically an exercise in deceit and brutality. We wonder how souls who were born, lived and died with no concept of right and wrong will be judged on the final day. For the Supreme Judge there will be no difficult cases.

There are nations in which there is a faint glow of truth. This would include some of the most populous nations in the world. Their governments are authoritarian with flagrant disregard for human dignity. Christianity is either outlawed or institutionalized by the state to where it becomes innocuous. Corruption is rampant at all levels; judicial systems are a farce, while certain crimes are dealt with in extreme harshness. Women and girls are debased and often brutalized. Families are not structured on love and consideration.

There are nations in which the glow of truth could be defined as indirect lighting. This would be true in Catholic nations, more specifically, in all of Latin America. Governments tend to be fraught with corruption, which results in a diminutive upper class, a small middle class, but a large underprivileged class. This social and economic unbalance dooms these nations to eternal mediocrity, when not poverty and social unrest.

Historically, Catholicism has not been tolerant of Protestantism. This has been true in Latin America, but seldom has it lead to outright persecution. Latin bonhomie places greater value on friendship than on religion. Thus a Catholic, a Protestant and a spiritist will go on a fishing trip and never once will religious differences be discussed, unless in jest.

Under the indirect glow of truth, Latin American countries are fertile seedbeds for evangelization. While Catholicism struggles to keep stragglers coming to mass, evangelical temples are sprouting on every street corner. There is probably no other place in the world in which evangelization through colonization is more successful than in Brazil.

There are nations that today have a historical glow of truth, nations that at one time were host to the lineage of Truth and had in their midst living examples of what Jesus and the Disciples taught. In fact, in some of these countries, the gospel was preached by apostolic voice, as was the case in Italy.

The new birth, when the truth is received in one's heart, is an irrevocable happening,

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for even though the truth is later rejected and salvation is lost, that person can never return to his pre-new birth status with the Lord. On the day of judgment, such an one, who knew and rejected the truth, will be judged with far greater severity than thieves and murderers who never knelt at the foot of the cross and had their sins forgiven.

Nations are never born again, like people. Yet, when a nation is host to the Truth and exposed to its direct rays—especially when Old Testament principles are openly recognized and exercised in government—after the scepter has passed from such a nation, they become more corrupt than nations that have merely lived in the glow of the truth.

Italy has been mentioned, which, after a direct exposure to the Truth for possibly centuries, today encloses the Vatican (while technically a sovereign state, is umbilically attached to Italy), the habitation of the Babylonian whore that has misled hundreds of millions of souls through the centuries in the name of Christ.

Other Middle East countries could be mentioned that once were exposed not only to the glow, but to the glare of the Truth, and today are immersed in political and religious confusion, ungovernable and untamable.

However, we want to do a fast forward to recent history and consider several European countries.

Holland, the land of Menno Simons. It would be interesting to know how many pages of the Martyrs Mirror have Holland as their setting. Intelligent and progressive, the Dutch today are an amoral, libertine people, unabashed pacesetters in that which is evil.

France too has its quota of pages in the Martyrs Mirror. For many years it was the undisputed cultural center of civilization. French was the universal commercial, diplomatic and social language. Where France went, the rest of the world trailed.

France today could arguably be classified as irreligious (“Hostile or indifferent to religion; ungodly” —AHD). Both Catholicism and Protestantism have been rejected as too morally constricting. Where the truth once glowed in a special radiance, today we see a people insensitive to the truth.

Twentieth century German history leaves us bewildered. How could a country in which Truth glowed brightly for so many years, have fallen to such ignominious depths?

The First World War, a provocative conflict unleashed by Germany, resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, untold suffering and material destruction. The final chapter of this war was an unconditional surrender in which territory was lost, instead of gained, as had been hoped.

In both military and civilian circles, there were those who deeply resented the terms of the instrument of surrender, believing Germany had been sold out by the “November criminals,” as those who signed the armistice with the Allies were called.

This visceral discontent became the hotbed in which the malignant designs of Adolph Hitler took root. After gaining power, he feverishly began violating the Treaty of Versailles by rearming Germany. As the world dumbly looked on, he set in motion a machine that would ultimately destroy some 50 million lives, six million of them Jews.

Despots have existed throughout history. And never have they been able to work

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alone, but always with a strong contingent of loyal and fanatical followers. Hitler was no exception to the rule. What astounds us is that Germany was not a heathen nation, nor were its citizens heathens, as usually is the case of despotic rulers. The German people were a civilized, enlightened, industrious, very intelligent people. Yet millions of these exact people blindly followed Hitler, killing, plundering, destroying. (It's true that there were those—a minority—who sensed what was stirring and got out of the country while the getting was good; others were arrested and imprisoned or killed.)

Today as we view the German nation, the glow of truth is very weak. The life style, the demeanor of the people hardly suggests a present or past link with Christianity.

The apostle Peter believed that he was called to minister to his fellow Jews. His housetop vision opened an entirely new door of service. Doubtlessly, he continued preaching to the Jews when the opportunity arose, but the Gentiles now became a very definite part of his routine and mission.

Today our vision of mission work is definitely gentile. Yet, way down deep, we have a special feeling for peoples who have at one time been of the lineage. This is noble. It is a feeling that will probably remain with us until the end. But it is a feeling that must constantly be tempered with Peter's housetop vision.

The church today is anxiously seeking for open doors. Each year new nations are appearing in our Financial and Activities Report booklet. Some of the names are strange. Soon we read in the Messenger that there have been baptisms in these countries. But, what about Italy, Holland, France, Germany...?

Is the church failing these countries with which we share a distant spiritual heritage? Should we be doing more?

We have a mission in southern Brazil, in the city of Curitiba. There are thousands of Mennonites living in the city itself, in the surrounding area, and especially on the Witmarsum Colony. After a number of years of work, we have only one member—of non-Mennonite background.

Every now and then Mennonites from the Curitiba area visit us here on the Colony. I think that without exception, all are impressed. Almost all of them lament that they have lost something. It appears they don't know what. Yes, they openly admit they have lost their young people. They so much admire our young folks. But even as they decry their loss, in the same breath they begin telling us about their sons and daughters who are doctors, lawyers, engineers, musicians, politicians...

So what is the problem?

Contrary to what our thinking tells us, peoples who have at one time possessed the truth are not, as a rule, open to the truth. And so, like the apostles, we send missionaries to strange-sounding little countries out in the middle of nowhere.

As we read unpronounceable names in the Baptism section of the Messenger, we are more interested in who did the baptizing than who was baptized. Yes, we're glad that souls are getting converted in strange places, but we feel no special affinity with these names...

But, if in the Baptism section we should read: AMSTERDAM, HOLLAND, followed by Schmidt, Unruh, Holdeman, Koehn last names, we would become excited.

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Our zeal for mission work would increase. And probably the missionaries in those places would have to build fairly good sized guest houses.

I would share the enthusiasm if these long-lost sheep would return to the fold. But folks, there is a very slim chance of this ever happening.

Those who have at one time known the truth tend to reject the truth.

Those who have lived in the glow of the truth show some interest in the truth.

Those who have lived in darkness are calling for the light of truth.

It isn't uncommon to hear someone say, "Oh, I would never adopt a child because I just wouldn't be able to love it as my own." Such people have the perfect right to not adopt a child.

We must be very careful to not develop a similar attitude toward souls being added to the church, that is, to believe there are biological members and adopted members. We don't dare to think in these terms, if for no other reason than that the Lord doesn't. Furthermore, we must keep in mind that maybe the Lord plans to use some of these brethren in the overall operation of His church. If so, we must not stand in the way, but rather give them our full support—even though they are not heritage Mennonites.

The glow of truth is becoming weaker and weaker. The term "Christian nation" is losing its significance. Churches that once taught many good Biblical principles, including the new birth, have been drawn into the maelstrom of permissiveness and relativity.

Like a patient with a terminal illness, we can't expect better days ahead. The glow of truth will become fainter and fainter. And then the end will come. ▲

A Story

The Birdies

[This story, told by Lloyd Glen, was faxed to some folks in Brazil, who faxed it to their children, who faxed it to us. I don't know how many times it was faxed back in the US before reaching us. By publishing this story, which is to have taken place in 1994, I hope I am not infringing on any authorial rights. However, should this be the case, I apologize and offer to make amends.]

Throughout our lives we are blessed with spiritual experiences, some of which are very sacred and confidential; and others although sacred are meant to be shared. It's a message of love. It's a message of regaining perspective and restoring proper balance and renewing priorities. In humility I pray that I might, in relating this story, give you a gift my dear son, Brian, gave our family one summer day last year.

On July 22 I was on my way to Washing D.C. for a business trip. It was all so very ordinary until we landed in Denver for a plane change. As I collected my belongings from the overhead bin, an announcement was made for Mr. Lloyd Glen to see the United Customer Service Representative immediately. I thought nothing of it until I

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reached the door to leave the plane and I heard a gentleman asking every male if they were Mr. Glen.

At this point I knew something was wrong and my heart sank. When I got off the plane a solemn faced young man came toward me and said, “Mr. Glen, there is an emergency at your home. I do not know what the emergency is, or who is involved, but I will take you to a phone so you can call the hospital.”

My heart was now pounding, but the will to be calm took over. Woodenly, I followed this stranger to the distant phone, where I called the number he gave me for the Missions Hospital. My call was put through to the trauma center, where I learned that my three year old son had been trapped underneath the automatic garage door for several minutes, and that when my wife had found him he was dead.

CPR had been performed by a neighbor who was a doctor and the paramedics had continued the treatment as Brian was transported to the hospital.

By the time of my call, Brian was revived and they believed he would live, but they did not know how much damage had been done to his brain, nor his heart. They explained that the door had been completely closed on his little sternum, right over his heart. He had been severely crushed. After speaking with the medical staff, my wife sounded worried, but not hysterical, and I took comfort in her calmness.

The return flight seemed to last forever, but I finally arrived at the hospital six hours after the garage door had come down. When I walked into the intensive care unit, nothing could have prepared me to see my little son lying so still on a great big bed with tubes and monitors everywhere. I glanced at my wife, who stood and tried to give me a reassuring smile. It seemed like a terrible dream. I was filled in with the details and given a guarded prognosis. Brian was going to live and the preliminary tests indicated that his heart was okay—two miracles in and of themselves. But only time would tell if his brain received any damage.

Throughout the endless hours, my wife was calm. She felt that Brian would eventually be alright. I hung onto her words and faith like a lifeline. All that night and the next day Brian remained unconscious. It seemed like forever since I had left on my business trip the day before.

Finally, at two o'clock that afternoon, our son regained consciousness and sat up uttering the most beautiful words I have ever heard spoken. He said, “Daddy, hold me,” and he reached for me with his little arms.

By the next day he was pronounced as having no neurological or physical defects. The story of his miraculous survival spread throughout the hospital.

You cannot imagine our gratitude and joy as we took Brian home. We felt a unique reverence for the life and love of our Heavenly Father, that comes to those who brush death so closely. Our older two children were much closer to their little brother. My wife and I were much closer to each other, and all of us were very close as a family. Life took on a less stressful pace. Perspective seemed to be more focused, and balance much easier to gain and maintain. We felt deeply blessed. Our gratitude was truly profound.

Almost a month later, to the day of the accident, Brian awoke from his afternoon nap and said, “Sit down, Mommy. I have something to tell you.”

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At this time of his life, Brian usually spoke in small phrases. So to say a large sentence surprised my wife. She sat down with him on his bed and he began his sacred and remarkable story:

“Do you remember when I got stuck under the garage door? Well, it was so heavy and it hurt really bad. I called you, but you didn’t hear me. I started to cry, but it hurt too bad. And then the birdies came...”

“The birdies?” my wife asked, puzzled.

“Yes,” he replied. “The birdies made a whooshing sound and flew into the garage. They took care of me.”

“They did...?”

“Yes,” he said. “One of the birdies came and got you. She came to tell you I got stuck under the door.”

A sweet, reverent feeling filled the room. The spirit was so strong, yet lighter than air. My wife realized that a three-year old had no concept of death and spirits, so he was referring to the beings that came to him from beyond as birdies, because they were up in the air like birds that fly.

“What did the birds look like?” she asked.

“They were so beautiful. They were dressed in white, all white. Some of them had green and white, but some of them had on just white.”

“Did they say anything?”

“Yes,” he answered. “They told me that the baby would be alright.”

“The baby...?” my wife asked, confused.

“The baby lying on the garage floor.”

He went on. “You came out and opened the garage door and ran to the baby. You told the baby to stay and not leave.”

My wife nearly collapsed upon hearing this, for she had indeed gone and knelt beside Brian’s body. Seeing his crushed chest and unrecognizable features, knowing he was already dead, she looked up around her and whispered, “Don’t leave us Brian; please stay if you can.”

As she listened to Brian telling her the words she had spoken, she realized that the spirit had left his body and was looking down from above on this lifeless form.

“Then what happened?” she asked.

“We went on a trip,” he said, “far, far away.” He grew agitated trying to say the things he didn’t seem to have the words for. My wife tried to calm him and let him know it would be okay. He struggled with wanting to tell something that was obviously very important to him, but finding the words difficult. “We flew so fast up in the air. They are so pretty, Mommy.”

He added, “And there is lot and lots of birdies.” My wife was stunned. Into her mind the sweet, comforting spirit enveloped her more soundly, but with an urgency she had never before known.

Brian went on to tell her that the birdies had told him that he had to come back and tell everyone about the birdies. He said they brought him back to the house and that a big fire truck and an ambulance were there.

A man was bringing the baby out on a white bed and he tried to tell the man the baby was okay, but the man didn't hear him. He said the birdies told him he had to go with the ambulance, but that they would be near him. He said they were so pretty and so peaceful and he didn't want to come back. And then the bright light came. He said that the light was so bright and so warm and he loved the bright light so much. Someone was in the bright light and put his arms around him and told him, "I love you, but you have to go back. You have to play baseball and tell everyone about the birdies." Then the person in the bright light kissed him and waved bye-bye. Then...Whoosh!...the big sound came and they were in the clouds.

The story went on for an hour. He taught us that birdies are always with us, but we don't "wee" them because we look with our eyes and we don't hear them because we listen with our ears. But they are always there. You can only see them in your heart. They whisper the things to help us do what is right because they love us so much, Brian continued, stating, "I have a plan. Daddy has a plan. Everyone has a plan. We must all live and keep our promises. The birdies help us to do that 'cause they love us so much."

In the weeks that followed, he often came and told us all, or part of it again and again. Always the story remained the same. The details never changed, nor were they ever out of order. A few times he added further bits of information and clarified the message he had already delivered. It never ceased to amaze us how he could tell such detail and speak beyond his ability when he spoke of his birdies. Everywhere he went he told strangers about the birdies. Surprisingly, no one ever looked at him strangely when he did this. Rather, they always got a softened look on their faces and smiled. Needless to say, we have not been the same since that day, and I pray we never will be. ▲

Thinking Out Loud

Sunday School

[A reprint of this article, which appeared in BN no. 10, of March 92, was requested.]

Have you ever tried to imagine what Sunday morning services would be like without Sunday School?

It's hard to imagine. We have grown up with Sunday School. We appreciate it. For most of us, it has been a source of many blessings.

Sunday School, as conducted in our circles, is made up of four basic parts: the lesson, the superintendent, the teachers and the students.

The lesson. We as a church took a giant step forward when we decided to write, edit, and publish our own lessons. Many excellent lessons have been written and enjoyed by those attending Sunday School.

It is important that those writing lessons remember that all comments made by them, beginning with the introduction, should be relevant to the lesson title and the lesson text. As the lesson is being written, the author should frequently stop and ask

himself: Is what I am writing in tune with the title and text of this lesson? If the answer is no, he should backtrack to where he got sidetracked and restart at that point.

It is easy to overlook the importance of the **Illustrations** section of the lesson. A story well told—especially an experience—is an impressive way to wind up a lesson. Very few, if any, comments should be given here. A good illustration talks for itself.

The superintendent. The superintendent should be a man filled with the Spirit, with enthusiasm, but not with a lot of words. A long introduction is the best way there is to wreck a Sunday School lesson. Never should he tell the congregation what his conclusions were as he studied the lesson. Two or three well placed questions can do miracles. An experience told in a few words, or an illustration can be helpful. The superintendent's job is to take the cap off the gas tank – not to fill it with gas.

The teacher. No matter how good the lesson and no matter how efficient the superintendent, without a prepared teacher, the class will very likely be a failure.

What constitutes a good teacher?

1. Above everything else, a good teacher is a spiritual brother or sister. But that's not enough.

2. A good teacher loves Sunday School. He enjoys teaching. He is prepared to teach, even when it isn't his Sunday. Just in case...

3. A good teacher studies his lesson. He doesn't only read it. He studies it. He studies it already at the beginning of the week so that he can meditate, and if necessary, do some research. This doesn't mean he knows all the answers. In fact, he shouldn't know them all. It means that he is prepared to both ask questions and intelligently handle questions that the class may ask.

4. A good teacher tries to never be absent on his Sunday to teach.

How should a good Sunday School class be conducted?

First of all, the teacher needs to be the teacher. He should NOT slink in and inconspicuously sit down on the bench somewhere with the rest of the class. Preferably he will stand up in front of the class. Or depending on circumstances, sit on a chair facing the class.

Why?

To understand why, let's try and understand what the teacher should do once he is in the classroom.

Never, never should a teacher open a class with the statement, "Well, it's open for discussion." (Nor should he attempt to teach a lesson in false humility by droning on about how incapable he is and how everyone could do it better than he.) Even though everyone has studied his lesson, the teacher should always clearly state the title of the lesson. The Key Verse can be read, and in some cases, the Introduction. This depends on the teacher and the circumstances. Once this little preliminary is taken care of, the teacher should take half a minute or so and tell the class how he feels about the lesson. This should be a frank statement. It may be, "I have found this lesson to be very difficult. I'm anxious to know how the rest of you have found it."

How much is said will depend very much on the individual class. In some classes—especially adult classes—at this point it may be possible to open it up for discussion. In

some classes it is necessary to make a few additional comments and then ask a question. Just in case that question fizzles out, have another one or two prepared that approach the lesson from a different angle.

A teacher should never, never be prepared to preach a sermon in case the class won't talk. The class senses it when a teacher is prepared to preach and usually give him the chance.

Teachers should learn to build on what the students say. All too often a student comes up with a good thought, but for some reason no one picks it up. The alert teacher will pick up this thought and weave it into a pattern. "What John just said agrees with what Pete said in the beginning."

The teacher should not stand up front leafing through his quarterly while others are speaking. He should look at them. Let them know he is following what they are saying. Especially in the case of a student who feels a bit insecure it is helpful to comment, "I appreciate that thought. I had never really thought of it in those terms, but it definitely makes sense."

Teachers should think of their Sunday School class as a long bicycle that has as many seats and sets of pedals as there are students. The teacher sits in the front seat and does the steering.

To get a class started, a teacher must at times have to pedal hard. However, the moment he feels others are beginning to pedal, he should slack off. It is his job to make *all* of the riders feel that they are responsible to help keep the bike moving. If, as can happen in rare cases, no one pedals, the teacher should try several different approaches to get the others interested. If this doesn't work, he too should stop peddling. Usually several minutes of silence will break the ice. Never should he launch into a sermon when this happens.

Back to the bicycle, not only must the teacher pedal at times, but he must always steer. Even adult classes can get way off the subject. In rare occasions this is tolerable. To stick to the lesson can best be described as decency and order. Especially when sensitive areas are touched on, the teacher should be quick to use the handle bars.

The students. For the students to think everything depends on the teacher is most unfair. They too must pedal. They too must study their lesson. They too must meditate during the week.

The lesson should not be studied in an attempt to learn all the answers. Few things can upset a class more than to have a student who tries to give his "conclusions" on every question that is asked.

Each student should feel he is part of the class, that he has a responsibility. Anytime no one talks in class, it's a good idea to calculate more or less how many minutes went by in silence. Multiply that by the number of students present. That is the number of man/minutes that have been wasted. Time is too precious for this.

A Sunday School class should be regarded as a place where interesting things are *discovered*. Think of it as a puzzle. As each student makes his contribution a picture begins to form. At the end of the class we hear comments like, "You know, I had never thought of that before."

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That's what Sunday School is all about. It is a place to share ideas and convictions. Not a place to open the door on a cage full of ideas and see how many you as a student can get flying around.

One of the greatest destroyers of a good discussion are "What if...?" questions about things that will very likely never, ever happen. "What if the church decided that it is wrong to have air conditioning?"

We as a church need to be more careful in selecting our teachers. Not everyone has the gift of teaching. To place a brother who doesn't have this gift in a position he is unable to fill is not advisable; it is distressing to both the teacher and the students.

In our Sunday morning services we have Sunday School and preaching. We would be extremely disappointed if Sunday after Sunday our ministers failed to prepare themselves. Their lackluster sermons would soon affect overall attendance. It would be the talk of the town that our ministers were letting us down.

What about us when we don't prepare for Sunday School? Before the Lord, the infraction is the same, is it not? Maybe in a lesser degree, but the same.

Now, a few ways to wreck your Sunday School:

1. Occasionally stay home.
2. Don't study your lesson.
3. Don't talk in class.
4. Talk too much.
5. Try to get others to see things as you do.
6. Enjoy and promote a good argument.

What are some signs of a successful class?

1. When the final bell rings, everyone would like another 15 minutes to finish the discussion.
2. When you see small groups of brethren returning to the main auditorium, still discussing the lesson.
3. When the minister gets up to have the introduction, he has been so impressed by the discussion that he makes more comments on the lesson.
4. When someone says, "I had never thought of that before." ▲

Life in Brazil

by Kevin Diaz, for the Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune, March 11, 2004

American farmers move to the new frontier: Brazil

[This article was sent to me by Bob Boeckner and Neil & Rosalee Holdeman. Josh Neusch used to live with our neighbor Doug Ferrell, who now also lives in Mato Grosso. Josh would occasionally come to our services. Doug's son Richard is a member at the Rio Verdinbo Congregation.]

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Josh Neusch is a modern-day settler in the new global economy.

Raised on a family farm in Minnesota, Neusch now owns 7,500 acres in the Mato Grosso state of Brazil, one of the planet's last great expanses of virgin farmland

Last year, with the backing of his family and a farming partner from Illinois, the 22-year-old from Fairmont, Minn., bought land on the cheap. Very cheap: about \$150 an acre.

He paid for it in sacks of soybeans—the currency of land in central-west Brazil

His workers get by on little. Government bureaucracy has been tolerable. Best of all, he doesn't have to sweat the low-cost competition from South America

He is the competition.

Finding the many blank spaces

Some call it one of globalization's latest quirks: Hundreds of farmers from the United States have moved to Brazil or bought land there because they can start out for less than they can in places like Minnesota and Iowa

“For a young guy like me, it looked like a good deal,” said Neusch, pointing to his stucco house outside of Querência, on the northern frontier of farming in Mato Grosso

Americans like Neusch aren't the only ones who have discovered the dramatic expansion of farming in the lush interior of Brazil. There are Germans, Dutch, Japanese and even a Mennonite community.

“It's a land rush,” said Kory Melby, a 34-year-old farmer from Greenbush, Minn., who is currently looking for a farm in Brazil. “I should have been here 10 years ago.”

For his part, Neusch doesn't consider it all that different from the way his great-grandfather Otto Neusch came from Germany 150 years ago to break the dirt in southwest Minnesota—then on the cusp of a different epoch in farming.

“At the time, that was the frontier,” Neusch said. “Now, it's here.”

There are many parallels in Brazil to America's old frontier farmers—moxie and isolation not the least of them.

There are plenty of men on horseback in Querência, their faces obscured by ponchos and cowboy hats. And there are Indian names for many things, including the new Americans in town: “Xingu Americanos.” That's the tag some locals have given Neusch, his farming partner, Clark Zumwalt, their farm manager, Aaron Stutzman, and a handful of other Americans who have come to the area in the past few years. “Xingu” is the name of the most prominent Indian tribe in the region.

Like the Indians—and unlike most city-dwelling Brazilian farm proprietors—the Americans like to live on their land, even if it's more than a two-hour drive to the nearest paved road. They also like to wear blue jeans and get mud on their boots.

“It's the Wild West,” said John Baize, an international agricultural trade consultant who has followed the rise of Brazilian farming, which is now pulling ahead of the United States in key commodities such as soybeans. “They're making money and pushing back the frontier at a fast pace.”

Off to Brazil

Riding shotgun in a mud-splattered Ford pickup truck, Neusch kept a determined gaze on the washed-out road to his farm, a rolling expanse of soybeans, rice and rainforest.

It was late January. High rainy season—about six weeks away from harvest. Two days later, a combine would have to be delivered to the farm on this road, all the way from Querência.

“It’s 60 miles of bad road,” Neusch said, as giant tires splashed through deep troughs of soggy maroon earth. “That’s why the land here is so cheap.”

It’s not just the abysmally bad roads of a tropical rainy season: It’s the snakes that sometimes trespass into the house; the wood-burning stove that’s needed to produce hot water; the steady din of an electrical generator in the shed; and a cell phone that has to be wired to a back yard radio tower to communicate—tenuously—with the outside world

For Neusch, the choices were to help expand the family farm in Minnesota, along with his dad and two brothers, or to cut out on his own.

“I thought, if nothing else, I’ll learn something,” he said. “All my friends were going off to college, so I thought I’d go off to Brazil.”

That was four years ago. Straight out of high school, he contacted Doug Ferrell, an American in Brazil whom he’d read about in a farm magazine. They talked, and Neusch offered himself up as a hired hand.

Rows of soybeans and rice—his first crop—surround an abandoned corral. The land across the dirt lane in front of his house is already going for twice its value of a year ago.

For Neusch, the whole land deal involved a sum that would have bought just a few hundred acres of farmland in Minnesota.

He never actually saw the sacks of soybeans that closed the deal—They’re merely an accounting device...

Meanwhile, Neusch’s workers don’t require much: the minimum wage is about \$88 a month, though he pays his most reliable hands double that. His lead worker, Constantinho, lives on the farm with his wife, who cooks and cleans for Neusch as her 3-year-old daughter follows behind.

Government paperwork is frustrating, but manageable—at least for a guy who’s spent four years in-country. He speaks a passably lilting Portuguese, and he fits in well with the friendly, down-to-earth locals

It will all be a little easier, Neusch says, when the road to Querência is paved. “Though I’ll believe that,” he said, “when I’m going down it at 60 miles an hour.”

Town pop up

Querência, population 1,200, is still absent from many modern maps of Brazil, having been little more than a small logging outpost until the past decade.

It’s part Klondike trading post, part west Texas cow-town. Its main street—still dirt—has been rutted by a procession of heavy grain trucks. The top destinations are

the two new elevator complexes. One is operated by New York-based Bunge; the other, just opened last year, is owned by Minnesota-based Cargil Inc.

The town is one of 100 small hamlets that have popped up—many without the benefit of local government—during Mato Grosso's farm boom of the past 10 to 15 years.

To potential investors like Kory Melby, the expansion of farming in Mato Grosso looks like a mirror opposite of life in Greenbush, the northwest Minnesota town where he grew up.

“In rural Minnesota, I see small towns dying and in Brazil, I see new towns pop up every year,” said Melby, who moved to Brazil two years ago in search of a farm...

Bad roads and huge distances—Brazil is larger than the United States' “lower 48”—still leave room for skepticism. Soybeans, Mato Grosso's principal cash crop, often have to travel more than 1,000 miles by truck to get to ports

But that, too, has parallels in the history of Midwestern agriculture. “If you just close your eyes and think about somebody 200 years ago in the United States, talking about this vast wasteland of prairie grasses, nobody thought you could break the land and produce a crop. It was so open. There was no infrastructure,” said University of Minnesota agronomist Seth Naeve. “Now look at it. It's the breadbasket of the world.” A growing number of experts believe that global trade will turn Brazil into the next breadbasket of the world. If so, its bearers will include fair-haired farmers like Neusch.

Exporting farmers

One of the links between Neusch, Melby and more than a dozen Minnesota farmers who have bought or invested in Brazil is a farmer-turned-consultant named Dan Mahoney in Morris, Min.

Mahoney, a graduate of Appleton High School in west central Minnesota has been leading farm tours of Brazil for the past six years, guiding would-be investors through the thicket of the Brazilian landscape and its government bureaucracy.

Mahoney's selling points for Brazil? “No government [farm] programs, low-priced land, low-priced inputs and low-priced labor,” he said.

“Where else in the world can you buy land, buy a new kind of machinery, and have both paid for within five years? You can't do that here, and you certainly can't do it in Europe.”

For Mahoney, who has traveled to Brazil 17 times, the Mato Grosso land rush has become something of a cottage industry. He estimates that 275 to 325 American farmers have put their names on Brazilian land titles in the past decade, joining hundreds if not thousands of other foreigners.

There is a colony of Mennonites in Rio Verde, in the Goiás state, and talk of a new Chinese farming community arriving in Mato Grosso. All that comes on top of an internal migration of Brazilian workers drawn by the prospect of new jobs in farms, processing plants and export terminals...

U.S. officials in Brazil say they have no record of the number of Americans buying land there.

“Our job is to increase U.S. farm exports, not increase exports of U.S. farmers,” said Kimberly Svec, an agricultural attaché in the U.S. Embassy in Brasília, Brazil’s capital. . .

No government farm programs also means no safety net for farmers in times of crop failure or low prices.

“It’s a free country, and everyone is welcome,” says Mato Grosso Gov. Blairo Maggi, the nation’s—and the world’s—biggest soybean farmer. “But we can’t do what the American government does. Everyone must make it on their own.”

[...] Mahoney says that the profit margins are still better in Brazil, and probably will get better as Brazil’s road infrastructure improves. “The time has passed for extremely cheap land,” he said, “but it has not passed for reasonably priced land.” ▲

This & That

The American Consulate on the Colony. Generally speaking, there have been good relations through the years between the American Colony in Rio Verde and the American Consulate in Brasília. Every now and then top consular officials take a special interest in the Colony. This happens to be the case with Malia Hiroux, the present Vice-Consul. She and her faithful helper, Márcia, brought the necessary forms to the Literature Center and set up their itinerary Consulate in the conference room. Thirty-six passports applications were filled out and other immigration related problems solved. In the evening there was a light food carry-in, after which Malia gave a talk on laws and procedures that apply to foreigners abroad, after which there was a question and answer session. Malia’s dad, who practices law in the US, accompanied his daughter and helped keep things going. Beside the good relations that something like this genders, it saved Colony folks hundreds, and maybe thousands, of dollars in traveling expenses if everyone would have had to travel to Brasília, apply for passports and then return several weeks later to pick them up.

The Asian rust in soybeans is no joking matter. Our rainy season was especially rainy this year, which aggravated the rust problem. Those who managed to spray their beans on time, up to two or three times, have a chance of a fairly normal crop. Those who didn’t—and it was difficult with rains coming almost every day—are taking a real beating. Some are harvesting a third, or less, than normal. The positive side to this story is that the price of soybeans is good. Very good.

Wal-Mart has taken a giant step ahead in Brazil, eight years after opening its first store. Until now, progress has been relatively slow—at least by Wal-Mart standards. One of the first lessons learned was that what works in America doesn’t necessarily work in Brazil. An example is the traditional pep sessions in which all the associates give the sales whoop. That flat didn’t go over in Brazil. Workers preferred taking refuge in restrooms, which is a reasonable solution, except that there weren’t enough restrooms to go around. So the practice was dropped. Suddenly, Wal-Mart jumped from 6th place in national ranking, with 25 stores and annual sales of a bit over half a billion dollars, to 3rd place, 143 stores and projected sales of 1.6 billion

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dollars. Why the sudden leap? A Dutch supermarket chain was bought out for 300 million dollars. Since these stores are in northeast Brazil, there will be no immediate repercussion in the central part of the country... Unless, they decide to buy out some chain in this area. We're supposed to be getting a Wal-Mart in Goiânia before too long.

Only two of our staff members, Ministers Mark Loewen and Mervin Loewen, went to Annual Meeting this year. After the mass exodus to Conference, people seemed quite happy to stay home.

A meeting was held recently in the Rio Verdinho social hall to see if anyone was interest in moving to the state of Roraima. Apparently not very many families are interested. One of the biggest problems is the distance—so far that people would probably go back and forth by plane.

The Boa Esperança colony will grow again. Luiz Duarte, from the Rio Verdinho Cong. sold his place and bought Dan Coblentz' place at Boa Esperança (Dan & Clara Coblentz live in the US). There is talk that at least another family will be moving that way.

The rainy season appears to be coming to an end. Nights are growing cooler, a sign we're going into the dry season.