

The Crime of Owning Vacant Land

Hugh Owen Pentecost

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In determining the question as to whether or not we are dealing fairly and justly with our fellow-men and women in our industrial relations, two things are absolutely necessary. Firstly, we must get a clear idea of how we can rightly acquire wealth; and second we must be absolutely honest with ourselves. I find both these things lacking in many persons: they have confused ideas as to what constitutes an honest getting of wealth, and that they will not readily admit that what they, themselves, are doing is wrong, even though they have a pretty fair idea of honesty in regard to other person's doings. There are men on the stock exchange for example, who think that it is dishonest to run a bucket shop. There are men who speculate in real estate who look upon gambling with cards as a horrid business. There are men who float worthless stocks in wildcat mines who would not associate with a bunco steerer or a green goods man.¹ But those who are not engaged in any of these practices can see no difference between them as I have just set one over against the other. There is an old adage that says: "It makes all the difference in the world whose ox is gored", and there is a great deal of truth in it. As we sit and listen to the preacher we can almost always think to whom the sermon applies, but it rarely occurs that it applies to us.

But in discussing the question that is now before us I take it for granted that I am talking to persons who are intelligent enough to understand a simple principle when it is clearly stated; and honest enough to admit it if the principle applies to them, personally.

I am now going to state a general principle about the getting of wealth that I think will be very difficult to disprove, and I am going to ask you to be candid enough to decide fairly whether or not under the operation of this principle you are, in the strictest moral sense, an honest person. If you discover you are not, we may wait till I get through discussing general principles, and, perhaps, we can then determine what you ought to do about it.

Wealth can only be produced by the application of labor to land: to what we may call the raw materials of nature. This labor is applied for two purposes: first, to get the raw material into the desired condition for use; and, second, to convey it to the person who wishes to use it. Hence wealth is produced by working raw materials in to shape and by transporting them.

A simple illustration is this: a ton of coal in the ground in its natural state is not wealth. It is simply raw material awaiting the appearance of the laborer. But a ton of coal lying at the mouth

¹ A "green goods man" was a counterfeiter who sought "agents" to buy the fake money through letters or advertising. "Bunco steerer" meant a swindler or confidence-trickster.

of a mine, is wealth, and it belongs to the individual who dug it out of the earth. And when that ton of coal gets into the hands of the person who burns it the process of production is complete, and all the value of that ton of coal belongs to the persons whose labor assisted in getting out of the earth and into the hands of the consumer.

I may remark, in passing, that this excludes two persons who, under our present industrial system, figure very largely in such a transaction. It excludes the person who is the legal owner of the land in which the coal is, but who does no work in getting the coal out of the land; and it excludes the holder of the stocks or bonds of the railroad over which the coal is hauled, and, who, also, does no work in transporting the coal. Anyone who cannot see this, with a little thought, must have something the matter with his organs.

In such a case as the one supposed it is very easy to determine whether you get your money rightfully or not. If you are one of the persons who dig the coal or help get it to market, part of the value of the coal belongs to you. But if you are mainly an owner of the land or an owner of railroad stocks and bonds, none of the value of the coal belongs to you. You do not make your money by labor. You make your money by law. That is to say, other people produce wealth and you take it away from them. You are in a comfortable position, because what we call government is organized for your benefit. The law courts and the policemen and soldiers are all kept in working order for the purpose of taking away part of the miners', railroad employees' and cartmen's wealth and giving it to you.

Let us not forget the principle. If you labor to produce wealth and do produce it, what you produce is yours and nothing else is yours. If you could find a naked savage digging clams you would have a perfect illustration of the rightful way to get wealth, and there is no other rightful way. Wealth can only come to a person rightfully in the form of wages, and wages should always be equal to the amount of wealth produced. What we call rent, interest, profits and taxes are names given to different ways of taking away by force from the wealth-producers what they produce. And if you could estimate the amount of money that goes to persons in the form of rent, interest, profits and taxes you would have the exact amount of money that is stolen from the working people by the processes of law; by forceful government.

I wish to get this very clearly before your minds, because I wish you to see that I am talking common sense to you. Now, get the naked savage in your mind. How is he to get anything without working for it? Can he live on rent, interest, profits or taxes?

Do any of these things grow on the trees or on the bushes, in the ground, or in the waters upon the earth?

If this fellow should try to live without work he should starve, as the Bible says every one who will not work should. Do you not suppose that if rent, interest, profits or taxes were natural products, this savage who knows every foot of the ground all about him, would know where to find them? If you will just keep the savage in your mind you will know that all the arguments constructed to defend the legitimacy of rent, interest, profits or taxes are utterly fallacious. I cannot show you the fallacy of them all now, but I think I can show you the truth with regard to rent, by which I mean the selling or renting value of land without improvements. I shall talk about house rents at some other time. When I say rent now I mean what is commonly called economic rent, but what is really monopolistic rent: just the selling or renting value of a bare rock up in Harlem, upon which you cannot raise a spear of grass, and upon which nothing is standing.

Now, there are single, not very large, bits of ground in New York, any one of which, if sold outright, would give the legal owner a large fortune, and any one of which if rented out — just the bare ground — would give the owner enough money, annually, to live on very handsomely. As a matter of fact, everybody knows that many persons live in utter idleness but in great luxury because they compel people to use what they call their land to pay them great sums of money. These sums of money are called rents. If these people had bands of retainers and swooped down upon the New Yorkers, as the Highlanders of Scotland used to swoop down upon the lowlanders, they would be called highwaymen, but because the working people support a number of policemen to enable these idle persons to collect this money from the New Yorkers, and because it is all done by papers and forced agreements, these idle persons are called our “best society”, and are looked upon as constituting all that is precious in the American nation.

But now look squarely at the transaction. Did these persons who are said to own this land make it? Certainly not. They bought it, or inherited it from other persons who bought it, or inherited it from other persons who took possession of it by force. Plainly speaking, this land came into the possession of the present owners because a set of politicians, now dead, decided that the original thief should not be disturbed in his possession of it. Here, then, we find one person in possession of something that should not be his, unless he wishes to use it, and compelling the industrious and useful person who does use it to pay him a more or less enormous sum out of his earnings for the privilege of using it.

Trinity Church Corporation, I believe, is one of the largest and strongest of the respectable bandit bands in New York.² A church, mind you, of Jesus Christ, who is said to be the savior of the world, the announcer of the Golden Rule, who denounced persons who devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayers — a church of Jesus Christ puts not a pistol, indeed, but a policeman at the head of many an industrious citizen of New York and compels him to deliver up large portions of his hard-earned wealth because the politicians says it not only may but must be done.

Will anyone dare to pretend that a man or a corporation that lives on ground rents, is, as such, a useful member of the community? Will any one dare to say that a taker of ground rents is not a parasite; is not one of the worst kinds of thieves? If an illegal thief steals from you and you discover him you can have him arrested, but in the case of a taker of ground rent, if you do not give him what he demands he can have you arrested. He is really a terrible kind of thief. He is one of those who have arranged matters so that an illegal thief can be arrested for stealing, because, you see, the more the illegal thieves get the less there will be for our “best families” to get. Oh, if you are going to be a thief at all, by all means be a legal one, because it is a great deal more comfortable to have a policeman help you do your stealing that it is to have him arrest you for doing it in the wrong way.

How, I ask, does it happen that this thing we call ground rent (which is what is commonly called economic rent, but is really monopolistic rent), comes into existence? Nobody produces it, as ground rent. Rent is not a material thing; not something that can be produced by applying labor to land. You cannot dig it out of the land, as you can coal; nor can you make it grow as you

² In 1697, Trinity Episcopal Church was established at the corner of Broadway and Wall Street in Manhattan. The church corporation owned a farm that lay “on Broadway, between the Battery to Fourteenth Street,” and spread out like a fan. In 1869, the wealth of Trinity was estimated at between forty and one hundred million dollars. Pentecost seems to have read *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* by Matthew Hale Smith (1869), which described Trinity as a part of the city’s corruption.

can wheat. Rent is simply a portion of wealth already produced that is passed from one person to another for the privilege of living upon a certain spot of ground.

Supposing that I was in possession of the only spring of water for miles around and I had sufficient power to keep everybody away from the spring. And supposing that I charged everybody who came for the water twenty five cents for a bucket full. Would I be producing anything that did not exist before? Of course not. I would simply be compelling my famishing neighbours to pass over to me a portion of their wealth for the privilege of using what they ought to be perfectly free to use; what they would get for nothing if I was out of the way. Well, that is rent. Rent is that portion of wealth which passes from one person to another for a privilege for which no one ought to be obliged to pay, and for which no one would pay if it were not for the guns that guard the natural springs of life.

Rent is not a product of labor, manifestly. What is it then? It is a fictitious value that attaches to land because land not in use is monopolized. I do not say the process has been an entirely conscious one, but it has been just as if a lot of people had purposely gotten together and said: "If now we can keep people off the land we can make them pay for the privilege of using it." And according to this arrangement our rulers, (the politicians, policemen and soldiers), permit individuals to own vacant land as well as land they wish to use. The result is that, since there is nowhere that I can freely set my foot, I must pay somebody for the use of land.

It is said that rent arises from the pressure of population upon certain portions of the land; but I do not believe this. It is perfectly clear to my mind that if all land not necessary for productive use were as free as it ought to be there would be no selling or renting value of land, or if there would be any it would be too transient, too variable, too temporary, too subject to the movement of population to catch and hold for purpose of taxation. There is just as valuable coal land in Pennsylvania unused as there is in use. There is just as valuable land around New York Harbor unused as there is in use. And so it is everywhere. Land is useful for so many purposes that there is probably very much more *first-class* land in the world that the human family will ever need. It is perfectly clear to me that ground rent, monopolistic rent, is the result of monopolizing vacant land.

If that is true (and there is not a doubt of it in my mind), then a taker of ground rent is exactly like a person who compels a starving man to deliver up his bag of gold for a crust of bread. He is a person who forms more or less of the unconscious conspiracy to keep people off the land, and thus force them to pay him for the privilege of earning a living. The value of land arises from the fact that people are prevented by force from going upon the vacant land to earn their living from the production of wealth. Take away your policemen and your soldiers and let the people spread out over the earth and monopolistic rent would disappear: then all persons who live upon the value of land would have to get their living in some other way.

If this reasoning is correct, one of the greatest crimes it is possible to commit is to hold a piece of vacant land out of use. The man who does that is a thief and a man-starver.

He is a thief because he is hoping to get, and generally does get, more for the land than he paid for it, or he is hoping to be able, and generally is able, to live off it without work. And he is a man-starver because men are starving for want of the land that he will neither use nor let them use. Don't you see, that if all vacant land in this country were free, when immigrants and others could find no-one to employ them they could go on the land and sustain themselves, and gradually get rich, as the earlier settlers in the West did before they were ruined by enforced

taxation? If you do not see this it is only because you have not thought about it long and clearly enough.

Plain as it all is now, it took it took a long time to make people see the crime of holding a slave. So, too, there are many persons who do not see what a crime it is to hold land out use. I know this. I know there are thousands of estimable persons who are holding land out of use and are not at all conscious that they are doing a great wrong to their fellows; and when the truth is pointed out to them they justify themselves by all sorts of excuses, excuses that are just as honestly made as were those that the slave-owners used to make. Some say that as long as the system as is as it is, it is perfectly legitimate to speculate in land — to hold land out of use while people are starving for lack of it. Some say that the people would not go on the land if it were free; that they love to swarm in cities. Some say that even if land monopoly is an evil nothing can be done about it.

I do not say that the people who make these excuses are not more or less honest and sincere, and I do not wonder at their blindness; because anyone who studies the human mind knows that it takes a long time to make the average man see that there is anything wrong in what is and what has always been. The end of the argument about God, for example, generally is that there must be a God because it has always been believed that there is a God. Well the, was it not also believed for thousands of years that there were witches? Oh, yes, but that's different. The soul must be immortal because all peoples have believed in future life. But did not all peoples once believe the world was flat? Oh, yes, but that's different. You now see that chattel slavery is wrong, notwithstanding that for a hundred of years ministers of the gospel thought that the slave quarters were part of the plan of God, just as they now think the tenement house is. Oh, yes, but that's different. In the section of the country where I was born every man used to carry a buckeye³ in his pocket for the rheumatism, notwithstanding that nobody was ever cured of the rheumatism by a buckeye, and many persons had the rheumatism who carried buckeyes all the time. You laugh about that. Anybody ought to be able to see how foolish that it. Oh, yes, all these things are perfectly clear to you.

Well, it is just as clear to *me* that one of the wickedest things a man can do is to hold land out of use. I look at those swarms of people in the tenement houses. I hear their groans or their inane laughter which is sadder than tears, because it indicates that poverty has blunted their aspirations. I see them in the night; their waxy faces and grimy hands and bad-smelling bodies go trooping through my dreams; they sit with me at my table; they rebuke me when I enjoy myself; they chide me if I give my children a penny to spend on some trifle; they scratch always at my conscience; they gnaw at my heart; they point at me with a very Nathan's finger; they make me feel responsible, somehow, for their miseries.⁴ Day and night, day and night, armies of tramps and prostitutes, and weakly children, and slangy girls, and vulgar boys, and poor tired-backed women, and plodding men go marching before me.

³ The fruit of the Ohio buckeye tree is a spiny capsule, 1½ to 2 inches in diameter, containing one to three large dark nut-like seeds, resembling the eye of male deer. Pentecost was born at New Harmony, Indiana, where the tree is common. He is referring here to what must have been a folk remedy.

⁴ In the Bible (2 Samuel, Chapters 11 and 12), King David secretly commits adultery and murder. God then sends the prophet Nathan to David, and Nathan tells a story about a man who stole a poor man's lamb. David was enraged and swore to kill the thief, but then "Nathan said to David, Thou art the man." Nathan accuses David of his crimes and his hypocrisy in clear detail. David acknowledges his crimes and later becomes righteous.

And then that pageant that we call “society” falls into a parallel line. I think of Fifth Avenue, and Newport, and Lenox, and Tuxedo;⁵ I think of the cross-country runs after the fox or anise seed bag; the hunt balls; the winter carnivals and summer wanderings indulged in by those whose only problem is how to use the time in more and ever more amusement.

And when I look at the vacant land — smiling, fruitful, ready for the hand of man, ready for the laborer, waiting to be petted into good-humored laughter of grain and fruit, and I know that the tenement house swarms with the working poor and the watering place is gay with the idle rich because the vacant land is held out of use. And I go almost frantic because some persons are so blind that they cannot see the connection between all these things. I feel as if I must stop every man I meet and say to him: “Do you see that starving man? He has been wandering about for days and can find no one who will give him work. Do you see that vacant land? It has been lying there for ages, ready to give up its treasures to this starving man. But somebody is keeping him off the land.” And it seems almost past belief that anyone can fail to see what a crime it is to keep the man and the land apart.

All this is so clear to me that I am sure it will become clear to everybody some day. People are not bad; they are only slow to see things. When they see what is right they are very apt to try to do it. I say nothing about what is the right thing to do in this case now. I only want you to see the wrong. I want you to see that the rent-taker is the one who does not produce the wealth and therefore has no right to his wealth: is one who is made rich by law. I want you to see that rent is a tax upon human industry, and that it is a shame to live upon it. I do not want you to be like the one who said to me last Sunday, perhaps jocosely: “If I must be either a robber or robbed, I hope I can be a robber.”

I do not say that labor is honourable now, because it is not. Labor is now so underpaid that it is almost a shame for a man to work for what little he gets. But I do want you to see what an honourable world that would be in which all the wealth that a man possessed would be the result of honest labor. This is no sort of a world to live in. Only think of it — the ambition of most persons is to get to that point at which the machinery of government will grind them out a living without labor. Let us have no such ambition as that. Let us think of a world in which men shall have equal opportunities, and then exult in the prospects of the proud privilege of earning the bread we eat, rather than the mean privilege that so many now have of snatching another’s bread from him.

Most men now say: “Only let me be a soldier — a killer, a destroyer! Only let me be a person with landed estates — one who lives by robbing others of their opportunity to live. Only let me be a bondholder — one who catches in his basket the fruit that fall from another’s tree.”

Let not these be our ambitions. Let us say: “Only give me a fair field and no favor and I will earn my bread for myself and my little ones. Only give me freedom and I will gladly work to live.”

⁵ Pentecost refers to contemporary haunts of the rich: Fifth Avenue in New York City; Newport, Rhode Island; Lenox, Massachusetts; Tuxedo, New York.

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