



APPLE ORCHARDS

By Kurt von Schleicher

The call for every Christian to get involved with the Lord in reaping the harvest is urgent! Soil cultivation, seed planting, seed sowing, seed watering and the proper tending to the young plants are all important, but it's imperative that we not allow the ripe fruit to rot on the Branch!

It was like a little vacation. As I was casually driving through the country, the most wonderful fragrance just filled my car. I said to myself: *"It smells like the season for fruitfulness has come to this part of the world!"* What a delightful day it was indeed, as the wild sparrows sang their beautiful love songs and darted about. The quaint country road I was winding down was so picturesque... you should have been there. That particularly, stands out in my memory.

It was a simple, but comely road, enchanting, unoccupied and mostly straight as the crow would fly. But on both sides of that road were orchards full of green and gorgeous apple trees – so much so in fact, that as I turned to look at them, I wondered about how they came to be. Who had been tending them so well and to whom would their apples be sent to nourish?

Now, from time to time as I kept driving, I would glance over to the side and notice that the types of apple trees would vary according to their particular rows. In other words, different rows of trees would have different colored apples according to their respective tree type. It was eye-catching and pleasing behold. One row had the crisp green kind; the next row had the large yellow kind and the next, a smaller burgundy type. Line after line of these trees stretched back endlessly from the road, their boughs heavy-laden with large, round, shiny and certainly most of the time, red succulent fruit. Totally natural too, no cosmetic wax covered these babies! And the yield of the trees was just sitting there, ready and waiting to be picked. How inviting, how exhilarating!

You see, this was HARVEST TIME – a really exciting time! And if I can remember my visits to the farm as a boy correctly, all other activities on such a farm would usually cease when ever it was harvest time, at least until the crop was brought in. Yes, all man power and resources would be directed toward one effort only. But my wonderment over the trees seemed to grow as the miles slipped by. When and how would this enormous harvest be gathered in?

Suddenly I realized that for all the hours I had driven, I had seen no one. The groves of trees were totally empty of laborers. No other cars had passed me by either. No houses were to be seen. I was totally alone in a forest of exquisite apple trees.

But, as I proceeded down the road somewhat perplexed ... AT LAST, there were some apple pickers off in the distance! *"A thousand times, YEAH!"*—I thought. They were situated far from the highway, almost on the horizon – just lost in the vast wilderness of unpicked fruit. With difficulty, I could distinguish a tiny group of them working steadily. I drove on for some thirty minutes more and then again saw another little group. But I'd question myself, "Where are the others?" I couldn't be sure 'cause I was moving, but I suspected that all the earth beneath me was quaking and shaking with a kind of a silent laughter of hilarity at the utter hopelessness of the picker's task before them. What a gargantuan job! Yet the pickers went on dutifully picking.

ENTERING HOMELAND COUNTY

The sun had long passed its zenith, was making its gradual decent with a kaleidoscope of fiery colors, and the shadows on the relatively cold terrain were lengthening now. Then, without any warning, I rounded a curve in the road and saw a huge sign posted: *"Leaving NEGLECTED LAND COUNTY – Entering HOMELAND COUNTY."* The contrast in counties was so stark and startling that I scarcely had time to take in the notice. I had to slow down, for all at once the traffic was heavy. I think it was Sunday and people, by the thousands swarmed the road and crowded the sidewalks.

Even more startling was the transformation in the apple groves. Now far from the grounds being silent and empty, they were filled with the laughter and singing of multitudes of people. Indeed it was primarily the people I noticed this time, rather than the trees. It was people and houses! The apple orchards were still large, and again respective rows were made up of sundry kinds of apple trees, but a further distinction I noticed was that the variations were far less.

Pumped up for picking, I quickly pulled over, parked the car at the roadside, made my way toward them and just began mingling with the natives, so to speak. Smart fashionable gowns, neat shoes, showy hats, expensive couture suits, and starched designer shirts surrounded me. These locals were so sharp looking... somehow it made me feel a little self-conscious about my ordinary street clothes. Everyone seemed so fresh, poised, and cheerful.

"Is it a holiday?" I asked a well-dressed woman with whom I fell in step with, as I ventured to check things out closer. She looked a little startled for a moment, and then her face relaxed with a smile of gracious condescension.

"You're a stranger, aren't you?" she asked. Then she proceeded to inform me, *"This is Apple Picking day."*

She must have seen a puzzled look on my face, for she went on, *"It is so healthy and good to turn aside from one's labors and pick nice juicy apples one day of the week."*

"But don't you pick apples every day?" I asked her. *"It's obvious that there are many apples ripe and ready to be picked! And that's the reason I halted my car."*

"One may pick apples at any time. Occasionally our leader does pick an apple at some other time of year," she said. *"We should always be ready to approach and pick apples in a friendly manner, but Apple Picking Day is the day we have especially designated and devoted to the meaningful task of apple picking."*

FOUNDER'S MANUAL SCHOOL AND APPLE PSYCHOLOGY

I left her and made my way farther into the trees. Most of the people were carrying a handsome leather bound book. These books were embossed on the cover and artistically edged in gold. I was able to discern on the edge of one of them the words: *The Founder's Manual*, and below in smaller lettering: *For The World-wide Apple Picker's Confederation*. Some pickers had their names engraved on the cover. I overheard a couple at the water fountain talking about what a great apple picker the Author of the book was.

By and by I noticed that seats had been carefully arranged around one of the apple trees. The rows slightly rose upwards in circular tiers starting from the ground level around the tree. The seats were almost full – then, as I approached this group, a smiling, well-dressed gentleman with a plastic badge on, shook my hand and escorted me to a seat.

There up close around the foot of the apple tree, I could see a number of people. One of them was standing in front addressing all the people on the seats, and just as I sat down, everyone quickly rose to their feet and began to sing enthusiastically. The man next to me kindly shared his songbook with me. The book was titled, *Songs of the Apple Orchards*.

They sang for some time, and the song leader waved his arms with a strange and frenzied abandon. He even led us in some contemporary upbeat songs that weren't found in the songbook. There were some cool songs about the Founder and His plan. Many younger pickers would actually close their eyes and raise their arms, as others would dance about and shout. Then, in the intervals between the songs, the song leader exhorted the people in a tactful and smiley way to sing more loudly. (I think it was because some of the adult pickers looked so tired). This was lots of fun don't get me wrong, but I steadily grew puzzled inside.

"*When do we get to start picking apples?*" I asked the man who had lent me one side of his songbook.

"*It's not long now,*" he told me. "*We like to get everyone warmed up first. Besides, we want to cheer-up the apples and really make them feel at home.*" I thought he was joking... and I almost laughed. But his face was absolutely serious, so I lowered my eye brows in sincerity, tilted my head, nodded and tried my best to understand. There actually were many concerns and hazards connected to this field. Who would spray the trees? Who would build the harvest machinery and storage sheds?

Were the pickers fully prepared with the latest tools and irrigation methods? Who would be in charge of cultivation and transplanting? I heard how many pickers were giving their entire lives to insecticide research along with the conducting of surveys regarding proper pruning, grafting, and fertilizing. Some pickers had come up with clever heaters against the winter's frost. And countless studies were carried through on how to better treat bee stings, blisters and the sunburn a picker would suffer out in the groves. Much agricultural literature, software and videos were being mass produced for large sums of money... of course for the purpose of preparing the pickers for the different diseases, bruises and fungal problems an apple might suffer before it might get itself picked.

After a while, a rather fat man took over from the song leader and after reading two sentences from his well-thumbed copy of *The Founder's Manual*, began to make a speech. I guess the manual was kind of a jumping off place before he took off on his own tangent. Man, even though the speech didn't touch on picking or the Founder, this guy was dynamic! You could tell that he was a real professional. I wasn't clear on whether he was addressing the pickers or the apples themselves, but I did feel energized.

When I got distracted, I'd glance a ways behind me and see a number of other groups of people similar to our own group gathering around an occasional tree and being addressed by other men. Some of the trees were large and some of the groups were very large. Some of the trees had no one around them and some of the groups were of a different color, according to their specific type of apple tree and "group-think." Some groups were voting, some were forming committees, some were arguing about how to pick, some were leading their leader around their tree and others were only grading his speech. Countless leaders were doing an excellent job and you could sure tell it by looking at their constituents who were enthralled in deep thought.

"Which trees are we allowed to pick from?" I asked the man beside me. He did not seem to comprehend, so I pointed to some of the fruit-filled trees around us.

"Oh, this is our tree," he said, pointing to the one we were gathered around.

"But there are too many of us to pick from just one tree," I gently protested. "Why, just look at us, there are far more people than apples and no one here is even going for it!"

"But we don't actually pick apples," the man explained. "We haven't been gifted in that. That's the Senior Apple Picker's job, because that's what we pay him for. We're here to support him. Besides, we've not been to college to train for this work. You need to know how an apple thinks and feels before you can simply up and pick it successfully – you know, applying apple psychology and all. Most of these folk here," he went on, pointing to different ones in the picker's gathering there, "have never been to Founder's Manual School."

"School of the Founder's Manual – What's that?"

"It's where they go to study *The Apple Picker's Manual*," my informant went on. "It's a text that's very hard to understand, but going deeper in this manual is so very important for all! You need years of study in it before it makes sense. Here, I'll give you a new, easy reading *Founder's Manual for Beginners* so you can get started."

"I see," I murmured as I grabbed a hold of it. "Thanks for the book. I guess I should get started mastering it if I ever hope to pick an apple. I had no idea that picking apples could be so difficult."

WILL THE REAL APPLE PICKERS PLEASE STAND UP?

The man at the front was still making his speech. His face was red, and he appeared to be kind of emotionally agitated or indignant about something. Yes, I could sense there was an underlying rivalry with some of the other "apple-picking" groups. I guess some of them wanted to compete numbers-wise and had said things that were unfair about the way our group was dealing with the ripe apples. But a moment later a glow came over his face as he regained his composure and declared "We should set the loving example for them according to the Founder's Manual!"

"And we are not forsaken," he said. "We have much to be thankful for. Last week we saw three apples brought into our baskets, and the group's weekly giving was up. We are now completely debt-free from the money we owed on the new cushion covers that grace the seats you now sit on."

"Isn't that wonderful?" the man next to me murmured. I made no reply. I still felt something must be profoundly wrong. All this seemed to be so over complicated – a very round-about-way of getting to the business of picking apples. The apples were just hanging around right near us, waiting for a simple tug.

By now the man was reaching a climax in his speech. The atmosphere seemed tense. Then, with a very dramatic gesture he wiped the sweat from the furrows of his brow and with two hands he reached out toward two of the choicest apples. Then with simple flicks of the wrist the leader plucked them both clean from the branch, and gracefully placed them in the basket at his feet. It was beautiful! The applause was deafening. Shouts could be heard from way in the back.

Ok, this is beginning to get a little more exciting, I thought, as I quickly hopped to my feet. *"Do we... do we, ya know... start on the picking now?"* I asked my informant. *"Surely he needs help!"*

"What in the world do you think we're doing? This kind of thing doesn't just happen every week" he hissed. *"What do you suppose this tremendous effort has been made for? There's more apple-picking talent in this group than in all the rest of Homeland County put together. Why, think of the expense! Literally thousands of dollars have been spent on the tree you're now looking at."*

I apologized quickly. *"I didn't mean to be critical or rebellious,"* I said. *"And I'm sure the man must be a very good apple picker... YES, adept with advanced ingathering acumen, managing expertise and multiple other field competencies – but surely the rest of us could try. After all, there are so many apples that need picking. We've all got a pair of hands and practice makes perfect, they say. We could even get around to memorizing the necessary parts of The Apple Picker's Manual."*

"Hey, when you've been in the business as long as I have, you'll realize it's not as simple as that," he replied. *"There isn't time, for just one aim. We have our work to do, our families to care for, and our beautiful homes to look after. We..."*

But somehow... he was losing me. Listening intently became more difficult as light was beginning to break in on me. I was thinking, whatever these people were, they certainly were not apple pickers. Apple picking to them was just some form of spectator sport or some weird entertainment for their weekend pleasure.

I walked off with my head hanging low and my heart still lower. I tried visiting one or two more of the groups around the trees. Their words and style weren't that much different up close. Not all of them had such high academic standards for apple pickers. Some held classes themselves – interesting classes at that, on how to tactfully come in contact with, and actually pick apples. I tried to tell them of the trees I had seen in Neglected Land County, but they seemed to have little interest. *"We haven't even picked the apples locally yet, nor have we come close to perfecting our pickers."* was their usual reply.

AN APPEAL FOR ORCHARD WORKERS

The sun was almost setting now, and I was growing tired of all the noise and noble activity happening around me, so I flipped that new *Founder's Manual* they gave me in the window of my car and then got in. I began to drive back along the road by which I had come. Soon, surrounding my vehicle again, all around me were those vast and empty rows of apple orchards.

But there were some changes. Something had happened in my absence. Everywhere the ground was littered with foul fallen fruit – fruit that was moldy, squishy, discolored and worm-eaten. And as I watched, more fruit was dropping from the limbs. The rate seemed to gradually increase. Even off in the distance, it seemed that before my eyes the apple trees were just dripping with red drops like rain. Thud, thuk, thud...It was sad that so many valuable apples were hitting the ground and lay rotting in the earth. What a waste!

With tear filled eyes, the inequity of it all troubled me deeply. In my soul I felt there was something so disconcerting, something just flat out wrong about it! And my bewilderment grew as I thought of all the idle pickers in Homeland County. How frustrated I felt! Then, as I slammed my fist down on the seat next to me in absolute disgust, my hand came in contact with that freebie *Founder's Manual*. The book just bounced up off the seat and fell open to an old mandate. Now, I strained to focus in on the words, "***The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.***" "That appeal hits the nail on the head!" I shouted! How congruous! And as I quickly turned some more pages I read, "***Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.***" YES! That was my go-ahead! That's the go-ahead for us all! And as I climbed out of my car to head for some full-tilt enthusiastic apple picking...

...Man, my heart became so stirred within me that I suddenly woke up.

That was some dream!