



APPLE ORCHARDS

By Kurt von Schleicher

Our God of grace often gives His workers a second chance, but is there ever a second chance to harvest a ripe crop? The call for every Christian to get involved with the Lord in reaping the harvest is urgent! Soil cultivation, seed sowing, planting, 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 just 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 seemed beyond picturesque—you should have been there. That unique vision particularly stands out in my memory.

It was a simple but comely road, enchanting, unoccupied and mostly straight as the crow would tend to fly. But on both sides of the 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 this particular orchard 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 groupings of rows. In other words, different rows together ..of trees.. would have different colored apples according to their respective tree type. It was very vivid and eye-catching; 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 towards the horizon almost endlessly from the road, their boughs heavy-laden with large, round, shiny and certainly most of the time.. gorgeous red succulent fruit. Luscious! They made my mouth water just imagining the taste! 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. Gently wooing. How inviting, how exhilarating!

You see, this was HARVEST TIME – a really exciting time! And if I can remember my visits to different farms as a boy ..correctly.. all other activities on such a farm would usually cease when ever it was harvest time. Yup, at least until the entire crop was brought in. You see, all man-power, horse-power, tractor-power and other resources would be directed toward one effort only!

But my wonderment over the trees seemed to grow as the miles would slip on by. When and how

would this enormous harvest be gathered in?

Suddenly I realized that for all the hours I had driven over vast stretches of highway, I had seen no one out there. 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.

Value abandoned.

Isolated.

Forlorn.

Lonely!

But, as I proceeded down the road somewhat perplexed ... *"A-T L-A-S-T"*, there were some apple pickers off in the distance! *"A thousand times, YEAH!"*—I thought. They were situated far back from the highway, almost on the horizon's edge – 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 still moving, but I suspected that all the earth beneath me was quaking and shaking with a kind of a silent laughter, a sort of mocking.. one of absolute hilarity at the utter hopelessness of the picker's gi-normous task before em. What a gargantuan job! Yet the pickers went on dutifully picking. Good for them. Good for more than the crop!

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 it all in, or even begin to fully 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 tree 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 that I noticed this time, rather than the trees. It was people and houses! Of course the apple orchards were still large, and again respective rows were made up of sundry kinds of apple trees, but a further distinction that I observed was that the variations were far less.

Ampted. Excited. Stoked out. Soooo psyched! Literally 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, chic business and upscale golfer-casual styles, matching designer purses, some 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 threads. But everyone seemed so fresh, poised, and cheerful.

"Is it a holiday?" I boldly asked a well-dressed middle aged woman with whom I fell in step with, as we strolled forwards. I ventured to check things out closer as we neared more agriculture, the natural landscape, the entire botanic wonder, the ecosystem in and under the foliage, the other horticulturists and the pomaceous colorful fruit.

A bit bemused. She looked a little startled for a moment, and then her face relaxed with a slight smile of subtle but half-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 that full-on puzzled look on my face, for she went on with her comments, *"It is so healthy and good to turn aside from one's trade and normal 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 so many apples ripe and ready to be picked! And.. and.. and.. that's the reason I halted my car."

"One may pick apples any time. Occasionally our leader does pick an apple at some other time of year," she quipped. "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

Anyways, after I left her and made my way further into the trees. I could distinguish that most of the people were carrying a handsome leather-bound book. Odd place to wax studious! 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 rusty medal country-like water spigot talking about what a great apple picker the Author of that book was ..back in the day.

By and by I noticed that seats had been carefully arranged around one of the apple trees. The rows slightly rose upwards—up hill slightly—in circular tiers starting from the ground level around the tree. And all the seats were almost filled up with people of anticipation! Then, as I approached this group, one smiling, well-dressed gentleman in shorts with a plastic badge on, shook my hand and escorted me to an unoccupied seat. I guess that's his job. He took it very seriously.

"There you go young feller. Listen up good!"

Up close around the foot of the apple tree, I started to see and hear some other people. One of them was standing right directly in front of em all, and addressing the others in the audience. But just as I sat down and got comfortable, everyone quickly rose to their feet and began to sing enthusiastically. Sounded like they'd were accustomed to this—harmonious and all practiced up. And the man next to me kindly shared his songbook with me. I was having trouble finding the right page. The book was titled, *Songs of the Apple Orchards*.

"...la, law, la, laaww!"

They sang for some time, and the song leader waved his arms with a strange and frenzied abandonment. Fun! He even led us in some contemporary upbeat songs that weren't found in that songbook. Exuberant group!

Then came some catchy, pretty hip songs about the Founder and His plan. Many younger pickers would actually close their eyes and raise their arms halfway, as others would actually dance about and shout. Dust flyin' around. Then, in the intervals between the songs, the song leader exhorted the people in a tactful and smiley kinda way ..to sing more loudly. Has he been to cheerleader school? (I think it was because some of the adult pickers looked so tired and distracted). But this was somewhat enjoyable don't get me wrong. Yet, in spite of all other orderly rowdiness I was felt steadily more

puzzled inside.

"Pissst, when do we get to start picking apples?" So I simply asked that man who had lent me one side of his songbook.

"No worries. It's not long now," he assured me. *"We like to get everyone all warmed up first. Besides, we want to cheer-up the apples too and really make them feel at home."* Man, I thought he was joking... and I almost laughed. But his face was absolutely serious, so I lowered my eye brows and heart in an attempt at sincerity. I tilted my head slightly too, nodded and tried my best to understand.

Wanna grasp it all, I really do.

There actually were many concerns and hazards connected to this field. What about insects and fungus build up? Who would spray the trees? Who would build the harvest machinery, equipment and the storage sheds?

Were the pickers fully prepared with the latest tools and irrigation methods? Who would be in charge of cultivation and transplanting? I'd 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 heater-systems too against the harsh winter's frost. And countless studies were carried through on how to better treat bee stings, blisters and the sunburn that a picker would suffer out in the groves. Much agricultural literature, software and videos where being mass produced for large sums of money... of course for the purpose of preparing the pickers for the different diseases, bruises and psychological problems including phobias that an apple picker might suffer pre-picking.

After a while, a rather portly fellow took over the meeting from the song leader and after reading a couple sentences from his well-thumbed-through copy of *The Founder's Manual*, he began to make a speech-let. I guess the manual text was kind of a jumping off place before he, soared off on his own intriguing tangent.

Even though the speech didn't touch on "picking" or on the Founder, this guy was indeed dynamic! You could tell that he was a real professional. It wasn't really clear on whether he was addressing the pickers or the apples themselves, but you could tell that he felt energized.

I'd began to drift some ..a little distracted.. so 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 *emerging* as part of a huge regional network. Sad that some of the trees had no one ..or few 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 better, some were leading their leader around their tree constantly and others were only grading his speech. Countless leaders were doing an excellent job though and you could sure tell it by looking at their constituents who were enthralled in deep thought—glued to him.

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

"How bout them? They look pretty decent."

Whispering, he said, *"Oh, this is our tree,"* he said, pointing to the one we had been gathered around.

“Now shusssh! Why won’t you be quiet and just go along”

“But there are too many of us to pick from just one tree,” I gently protested. Why, just look at us, there seems to be more people congregated 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 any apple college to train for this work. You need to know how an apple computes and comprehends. The pros must learn how they feel before they can simply be pick successfully – you know, applying that 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. Deeper, deeper.. great depth matters a lot!”

“Here, you can get started. I’ll give you a new, easy reading Founder’s Manual for green-horn beginners so you can get started today.”

“I see,” I murmured as I grabbed a hold of it. “it’s gunna grab hold of me huh. 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. Complex-ania”

WILL THE REAL APPLE PICKERS PLEASE STAND UP?

Fifteen minutes had past. The man at the front was still finishing up his imperative speech. His face was red by now, 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 em wanted to compete with each other 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 the speaker’s face as he regained his composure and declared *“We all 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 orchard seats you now sit on.”

“Isn’t that so wonderful?” said the man next to me. He murmured with a smile all through the message. I made no reply.

I still felt something must be profoundly wrong here. Wasn’t all this becoming over complicated? Wasn’t all this jive slowly leading to 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. I could almost hear me calling to me...

“Yank me off this branch, please! I wasn’t designed to stay here forever.”

By now the man was reaching a crescendo of sorts in his speech. The atmosphere seemed to be getting more intense. Then, with a very dramatic gesticulation the speaker spun around, wiped the

sweat from the furrows of his brow with a crisp hanky and with two hands extended simultaneously he reached out toward two of the choicest apples, took hold....

Then with very simple flicks of the wrist the leader plucked them both clean from their branch, and then gracefully placed them in the basket at his feet. It was graceful, it was magnificent, it was soooo beautiful! The applause was deafening. Shouts could be heard from way in the back.

YES! YES! YES!

And everyone seemed satisfied.

Ok now, this is beginning to get a little more exciting, I thought, as I quickly hopped to my feet. *"Do we... do we... ya know... COME ON! Together, shall we start on the picking now?"* I asked my informant friend. *"Surely he'll need some help! Surely he knows it's time for us all to start!"* The informant, breathed in and out ..a deep sigh of disgust.

"What in the world do you think we're doing? This kind of thing doesn't just happen every week" he just hissed. *"What do you suppose this tremendous effort has all been made for?"*

"But there must be more apple-picking talent in this group than in all the rest of Homeland County put together" I muttered.

"Why, think of the expense that we'd incur though! Literally thousands of dollars have already been spent on the tree you're now looking at."

I apologized quickly. *"I didn't mean to be critical or rebellious or start a ruckus,"* I replied. *"And I'm sure that man must be a very good apple picker... YES, adept with the most advanced ingathering acumen, managing expertise, and even with other multi-crop competencies – but surely the rest of us could at least try..... after all, there are so many apples that need picking. I've got a pair of hands, you've got a pair—all of us here have a pair and practice makes perfect, they always say."*

"We could get around to memorizing the necessary parts of The Apple Picker's Manual early or in our spare time couldn't we?"

"Again, when you've been in the business as long as I have, you'll realize it's not as simple as all that," he replied. *"We must learn to juggle a lot of balls in the air all at once. There isn't time, for just one outward task. We have our work to do, our families to care for, and our beautiful homes to look after. We..."*

The guy was losing me. Listening intently became more difficult as light was beginning to break in on me now. I was thinking that whatever these people were, they certainly were not real apple pickers ...though they proudly wore the badges that said they were. Apple picking to them was just some form of spectator sport or some weird entertainment for their weekend pleasure. It was a topic to rehash and dissect like a frog in a science lab.

I just walked off with my head hanging low and my heart slumping still lower.

I casually tried visiting one or two more of the groups around the trees.

Wanted some encouragement, just a little. Their words and styles weren't that much different up close. Not all of them had such high academic standards for apple pickers. Some held classes themselves that were elementary... interesting classes at that, on how to tactfully come in contact with, and actually pick apples the easy way. I tried to tell them of the trees I had seen in Neglected Land

County, but they seemed to have missed what I said ..or had little interest.

Then one said, “*We haven’t even picked the apples locally yet, nor have we come close to perfecting our pickers.*”

AN APPEAL FOR ORCHARD WORKERS

The sun was almost setting now, and I was growing tired of all the noise and noble looking empty activity happening around me, so I flipped open that new *Founder’s Manual* that they gave me and was laying there on the dashboard of my car and then climbed in. I began to drive back along the road by which I had initially come. Soon, surrounding my vehicle again, all around me were those vast row after row of apple orchards with not even one person in em.

But now there were some changes. Something had happened in my absence. Everywhere the ground was littered with foul and fallen fruit—fruit that was moldy, browning, squishy.. some more discolored than others and some were worm-eaten. And as I watched, more fruit was dropping from the limbs.

Plop, blump, buuump... plop.. blupp.

The rate seemed to gradually increase too. Even off in the distance, it seemed that ..before my very eyes the apple trees were just dripping with reddish drops like rain.

Thud, thuk, thud ...It was sad that so many valuable apples were hitting the ground and just lay rotting there on the earth. What a waste!

Grew choked up some.. n emotional.

With tear filled eyes, the inequity of it all troubled me more deeply than I thought it could. In my soul I felt there was something so perverse, so disconcerting, almost tragic-like somehow.

Yep, something was flat out wrong about it!!! And my frustration, ire, and bewilderment grew as I thought of all those idle pickers back in Homeland County. How exasperating this felt to me. Somethin’ must be said!

IT’S A NO-BRAINER! I felt like yelling it over and over again!

Then, as I kept slamming my fist down on the seat next to me in absolute disgust, my hand came in contact with that freebie *Founder’s Manual*. It bounced in the air—the book just bounced up off that seat and fell open randomly. My eyes fell on an age old mandate posted in there.

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.***”

“*Wow, that appeal sure hits the nail on the head!*” I shouted!

Not incongruent, not at all disconnected from this situation! I looked at the surrounding neighborhood too. And as I quickly flipped and read some more of the pages I also found this statement, “***Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.***” Yuuup! That was my go-ahead! That’s the go-ahead for us all! Why didn’t those others come across this? And as I climbed out of my car to head for some full-tilt enthusiastic apple picking...

...My heart became so stirred within me ..that I suddenly.. woke up.

Man, that was some kinda dream!