

## The Evangelical Mind

### On Letting Chickens Strut Their Stuff

By Richard Mouw

Some Christian friends were talking about the debates raging these days about "animal rights," and they left no room for doubt about what side they were on. They wanted nothing to do with the folks who protest fur coats. And they certainly had no sympathy for the viewpoint made popular by Princeton University ethicist Peter Singer that the life of a healthy dog may be more valuable under some circumstances than that of a terminally ill child. I have no real disagreement with these friends on the basic issues. But I tend to hold back a little bit when Christians make light of the animal rights cause. I keep remembering a lesson that a devoutly Christian chicken farmer taught me many years ago.

On the face of it, the lesson does not seem to come to much. "Chickens are chickens," he said. But in the context in which he made his point, it struck me as a profound truth.

I was a graduate student at the time, and I was digging deep into questions about ethics and social policy. In a church bulletin I noticed that some Christian farmers were getting together to discuss the relationship between their faith and their farming practices, and I decided to listen in. It was an intriguing session. These folks—most of them Mennonite and Dutch Reformed—were serious about their religion and they wanted their deepest convictions to make a difference in the way they conducted their daily lives.

It was obvious that the chicken farmer had spent many hours working outdoors: his face was heavily tanned up to that point on his brow where his hat protected his bald head from the sun. He had a strong Dutch accent, and my guess was that he had not received much formal education. But he was in his own way quite eloquent, especially on the subject of a mass-production approach to chicken farming. "Colonel Sanders wants us to think of chickens only in terms of dollars and cents," he announced. "They are nothing but little pieces of meat to be bought and sold for food. And so we're supposed to crowd them together in small spaces and get them fat enough to be killed."

And then he moved toward his theological lesson: "But that's wrong! The Bible says that God created every animal 'after its own kind.' Chickens aren't people, but neither are they nothing but hunks of meat. Chickens are chickens, and they deserve to be treated like chickens! This means that we have to give each chicken the space to strut its stuff in front of other chickens."

I doubt very much that this farmer was a vegetarian. And I'm pretty sure that most of his chickens ended up on people's dinner tables. But he also sensed an obligation to treat his chickens with dignity—not human dignity, mind you, but chicken dignity.

My guess is that he would not have been able to answer all of the tough questions we might pose to him about the rights and wrongs of raising chickens. But, then, the sophisticated secularist defenders of animal rights these days don't have all the details worked out, either. This is not an area where consistency on all points comes easily.

My chicken farmer was setting forth some practical spiritual wisdom. As harsh as it may seem to the all-life-is-equal folks these days, from a biblical perspective there is indeed a kind of hierarchy of life. Read Psalm 8. God is "higher" and we humans are "lower"—but not as "low" as the animals.

God tells human beings to exercise "dominion" over the rest of creation (Gen. 1: 28). But that does not give us a right to do anything we want with non-human life. The New Testament teaches that "all things were created" both "through" Jesus Christ and "for" Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:

15-17). It is important, then, that we honor the divine purposes in our dealings with the non-human creation. Dominion is not the same as domination. The old fashioned term is that we have been made "stewards" of the world that God made. We are care-takers.

This means we must *take care* in the way we treat the animals. The farmer was right when he insisted that the fact that there are different "kinds" means that we must allow for different kinds of *dignity*. Chickens are chickens, after all.