

Faithful Eating

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

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The food we eat, both what we eat and how we eat it, may well be the most significant witness to creation care that Christians can perform. Eating has never simply been about putting fuel in our bodies. Though surely a physiological act, eating is also an ecological, agricultural, moral, and spiritual act. To eat is not only to bite into what is on our plate or in our hand. It is also to partake in the ecological processes, the agricultural economies, and the ethnic and cultural traditions of cuisine that make food possible and a joy. Every time we take a bite we communicate what we think about land and water, fellow animals, fellow humans, and God as the Provider of the many gifts of nurture we daily consume. We position ourselves as eaters who daily have the opportunity to care for and gratefully receive the blessings of food – or not.

Over the last century it has become more difficult for us to appreciate the deeply ecological and spiritual implications of eating because as urbanites we are often reduced to being shoppers and consumers of food. Not being directly involved in food's production – how many of us are farmers or serious gardeners? – it is common to think that food is a commodity responsive primarily to the dictates of money. The unprecedented fact about our time is that never before have so few known with sufficient detail where food comes from and how it is sustainably and justly produced. Today's typical suburban food shopper goes into a grocery store and finds tens of thousands of food products on display. The sheer amount of what is there,

along with its attractive display and packaging, makes us think that food will always be in plentiful and secure supply, provided we have the money. The availability, appearance, and relatively inexpensive price of foods compel us to believe that today's food production is an unmitigated success. When it comes to food, it seems there is little to worry or ruminate about other than its (still) unequal distribution.

Recent books by Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma*), Barbara Kingsolver (*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*), Raj Patel (*Stuffed and Starved*), and Paul Roberts (*The End of Food*), and the film *Food Inc.* demonstrate that our easy confidence may be misplaced.¹ It is true that today's industrial agriculture is producing more food calories than we have ever seen before. Moreover, global supply lines of meats, oils, coffee, grains, fruits, and other commodities — all heavily reliant on a steady flow of cheap fossil fuels — along with the consolidation of food processing and distribution into the hands of a few giant food corporations, makes it possible for many of these calories to be inexpensively priced. But these copious and cheap calories are coming at a very high price to our soils, waters, atmosphere, animals, and agricultural workers. Around the world small landholders are being forced off their land (to make way for commodity production) and then finding themselves and their families food insecure. Meanwhile, the processing and artificial enhancement of many of our foods is proving to be a serious detriment to our health and the health of creation as a whole.

The upshot of today's global, industrial food economy means that many Christians now find themselves in a position where our eating is a desecration to God. It is not as though we daily and deliberately choose to violate the land and its creatures. Rather, the food most readily available in stores, restaurants, schools, and hospitals simply is the end product of processes that have put profitability, production efficiency, marketability, and convenience above creaturely care, animal contentment, eater health, and farmer and food worker justice. To eat in a way that honors God and cares for creatures takes time, understanding, and daily work. It requires that we make the protection and nurture of our lands and waters a top priority. It also presupposes wide and detailed knowledge about the sources, life, and death that support and permeate our food, knowledge that fewer and fewer of us have.



Given the considerable knowledge and labor involved in responsible eating, should Christians make food — what we eat, how we grow and prepare it, how and who we share it with — a priority for the living of a Christian life? After all, didn't Jesus say, "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matthew 6:25)

Jesus is warning us that we can make food into an idol. We do this, for instance, when we obsess about food or when we become fixated on having

fine, even exotic, food whenever we want it. How many of us know that among today's seven billion people, over one billion suffer from *over-nourishment*—that is, from eating too many unhealthy calories—and that millions more suffer from various eating disorders (like anorexia and bulimia) meant to cover up deep personal suffering and pain? Jesus is alerting us to the real possibility that we can have an unhealthy relationship to food (and to other

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eaters when we set ourselves up to be the Food Police). He is warning us not to become gluttons or self-righteous. Instead, he wants us to become people who “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33), simply taking it for granted that when we do this the food creatures need to eat will be provided.

By telling us not to worry or obsess about food Jesus is not saying that food

is unimportant in God's kingdom. If that were the case it would be difficult to understand why Jesus spends so much time in the Gospels feeding people, eating with outcasts and sinners (cf. Luke 15:2), and celebrating the goodness of food shared with others. Jesus takes no delight in the hunger or ill-health of others. We must not forget that Jesus was derided by religious leaders as “a glutton and a drunkard” (Luke 7:34). As one commentator on the Bible has said, in Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from meal! In his life and ministry food clearly mattered to Jesus. It should matter to us too. The question is how.



We are given a clue to what a proper relationship to food looks like when we turn to one of the foundational stories in Scripture. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve commit the sin of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Was the sin eating? Clearly not since God had plainly said that they could eat freely from the many trees that are “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Genesis 2:9). They were, however, forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because in eating from it they would die (2:17). There are forms of eating that lead to life, even kingdom-of-God life, and there are forms of eating that lead to death. How should we characterize the difference?

A little further in the story we learn that the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good for food and a delight for the eyes.

Even more importantly, eating this fruit was purported to make its eaters like God (3:4-6). In other words, to eat this forbidden fruit not only resulted in a tasty experience. It amounted to adopting an entirely new relationship to the world and everything in it because now, having become like God, one no longer relates to others as a fellow creature – as one who receives life as a blessing and a gift – but as one who presumes to have control over them. Adam and Eve’s colossal mistake was to think that they could bend the world to their own will and desire. It was to think they could have all creatures on their own terms rather than God’s. It was to deny that they are creatures who *need*.

Another way to narrate this story is to say that we can eat in ways that either remember or forget God as the source and nurturer of life. When we eat so as to remember God, which is to eat properly, we eat with an appreciation for how food is a blessing and gift. This is no small thing, because it means, when its implications are consistently drawn out, that we will also relate to every other creature in a way that honors God. But when in our eating God is forgotten, we bring death to ourselves and to other creatures because now creatures are severed from their relationship to God who is the Source of all life. They have been made into idols that serve the narrow scope of our utilitarian or convenience concerns.

Among contemporary theologians, Alexander Schmemmann has described this death-wielding dynamic with precision:

...the world was given to [humans] by God as “food” – as a means of life; yet life was meant to be communion with God; it had not only its end but its full content in Him. ... The world and food were thus created as a means of communion with God, and *only if accepted for God’s sake were to give life*. ... Thus to eat, to be alive, to know God and be in communion with Him were one and the same thing. The unfathomable tragedy of Adam was that he ate for his own sake. More than that, he ate “apart” from God in order to be independent of Him. And if he did it, it is because he believed that food had life in itself and that he, by partaking of that food, would be like God, i.e., have life in himself. To put it simply, he *believed in food*.... World, food, became his gods, the sources and principles of his life. He became their slave.²

The sinful eating dynamic that Adam and Eve inaugurated works like this: people resist receiving food as a gift from God because to acknowledge food’s giftedness is to admit one’s need and dependence – it is to know we are not in control; we then transform food from being a gift into being a possession; as a possession we take control of the food and the many ecological and cultural processes that make eating possible; the control we assume invariably becomes self-serving and self-glorifying, which means food no longer signifies as God’s love and grace made delectable; because

the world of food is refashioned to serve and please us, its ability to feed and nurture others is diminished, precipitating needless pain and death; human eating becomes a destructive race to control and exploit the land, its creatures, and its eaters.

Lest we think this a mere theological abstraction, consider how this dynamic is being worked out in today's industrial meat production system. Because of our desire to have the cheapest food possible, millions of chickens are raised in a manner that violates their being and is an insult to God. Rather than being free to roam and range, chickens are crammed into perpetually dark facilities where they are fed a steady diet of food supplements (to make them grow faster) and antibiotics (to prevent them from dying in the disease-inducing facilities). Many of these chickens have been genetically re-engineered so they will grow bigger breasts (Americans crave white meat). Large breasts combined with rapidly accelerated growth means that many of these chickens find it difficult to walk. Some break their legs under the strain of their own weight. These are highly stressful and miserable conditions for the birds. Their stress and misery, however, are the direct result of our desire to eat chicken meat on terms that satisfy our desire for cheapness, volume, and convenience. In our eating we have become slaves to a food system that systematically degrades chicken life.

The degradation that is being worked out in these chicken facilities is also being worked out in almost all aspects of today's industrial food system. Soils are being systematically eroded and then poisoned with heavy applications of ever more toxic herbicides. Water is being wasted and polluted by the same poisons and by the application of synthetic, fossil-fuel derived fertilizers. Cattle, sheep, and pigs are often being raised in similarly cruel conditions as chickens. Ocean fisheries are being harvested to exhaustion and beyond the ability of fish stock to replenish themselves. Farmers around the world are seeing cancer rates go up as they work with toxic agricultural chemicals (many of which are banned in the United States), or are struggling under mounting levels of debt incurred while purchasing expensive seed and fertilizer inputs. Viewed ecologically, today's industrial food production represents a system that is unparalleled in its destructiveness.³ Food production and consumption, rather than being the means of life and communion with God and creation, has become instead the means of ill health, exploitation, suffering, and death.



Is a better way possible? What would a form of eating that remembers and honors God look like?

Faithful eating begins when we recognize that food is *not ever* cheap. It is a costly grace daily provided by God. It is costly because for any creature to eat, other creatures must die. The Cambridge dean William Ralph Inge once said, "The whole of nature is a conjugation of the verb to eat, in the

active and the passive.”⁴ That means that life’s movement and vitality is constantly being nurtured through the life and death of others. Every diet, even vegetarian diets, presupposes and is a daily witness to death.

Today’s commodification of food does its best to hide this fact from us. Fruits and vegetables show little trace of their origin in the soil, the very ground that is constantly absorbing the deaths of others and recycling them into future fertility. Meat products show little signs of feathers, fur, bones, or blood. Much of today’s highly processed food has been so altered that it is hard to see any of it as a gift from God. Food has become something we design, manufacture, and control.

The best way to get behind the deceptions and dissimulations of today’s food industry is to become more closely involved in food’s production. There are several ways to do this. An excellent, perhaps indispensable, place to start is growing some food ourselves. We do not need a lot of land, nor do we need to try to grow it all (a huge and difficult task). The point is for us to deeply sense – with our hands, noses, eyes, and mouths – the fragility, patience, beauty, pain, and miracle that the growth of food is. Doing even some gardening will help us become more humble and grateful eaters. It will help us see why food is a precious gift that needs our attention and care, our sharing and celebration.

Church members need not do this alone. It would be an even better way if congregations inspired by Jesus got involved in the food business. I do not mean simply that they go out and purchase or collect food for food banks, or run soup kitchens and food lines, as valuable as these activities are. I mean that churches turn some of their land, much of it currently under manicured lawns or parking lots, into flower and vegetable gardens and into fruit orchards. Then Christians could learn from each other the art of gardening and the skills of food preservation. This food could be shared within the congregation but also given to people in need.

Church-supported agriculture can be a powerful witness to the world that Christians cherish and care for the gifts of nurture God daily provides. Regenerative agriculture, agriculture that grows food by naturally increasing soil fertility and by respecting plants and animals, could model to others that we do not need to produce food with methods that poison or brutalize fellow creatures. For most of our histories, people have been directly involved in their own food production. We are in the odd and unprecedented position of thinking we do not have to be.

Christians can also become much more involved in supporting local food economies and sustainable agriculture practices already going on in their region. Today’s industrial, global food system fosters ignorance and anonymity. It presupposes the burning of a lot of fossil fuel to ship food a great distance, and it requires that food be harvested not with an eye to its nutritional quality but with the aim of transportability and a long shelf life. But when food consumers buy locally produced food they can see directly if

the fields and the animals were being treated in a way that honors God and respects creaturely life. When farmers and gardeners are found who do it better, they should be supported financially. As more and more Christians become committed to eating more faithfully, more and more farms will grow food that treats the land, water, plants, animals, and agricultural workers in a just and God-honoring manner.

Changing our shopping and eating habits is not going to be easy. We have all become accustomed to cheap and convenient food. This kind of food, however, is destroying creation. It is compromising good agricultural practices. We can do better. Today's typical American consumer spends less on food than any generation in the world's history. Many of us, re-evaluating our fiscal priorities, can afford to spend more for good food and for good farming. We can do more to make sure that this food is properly shared. Some of this will entail significant changes in personal eating habits. Some of it will require that we lobby government to get behind a Farm Bill that redirects taxpayer dollars to regenerative and natural systems agriculture and away from industrial and exploitative production.

I have a dream that one day all Christians will eat in ways that honor and celebrate the gifts of God's creation. In this dream creatures are made whole and healthy because of our communion with them. I also believe that Scripture calls this dream the Heavenly Banquet.

NOTES

1 Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006); Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2007); and Paul Roberts, *The End of Food* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2009). The documentary *Food, Inc.* (2009) directed by Robert Kenner is available on DVD from Magnolia Home Entertainment; a number of experts featured in the documentary contributed essays to the study guide *Food, Inc.* (New York, Participant Media, 2009) edited by Karl Weber.

2 Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1969), 94-95 (first italics my emphasis).

3 More detail on the destructiveness of today's industrial food economy can be found in the third chapter of my book *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

4 William Ralph Inge, "Confessio Fidei," in *Outspoken Essays, Second Series* (London: Longman's Green, 1926), 1-59, here citing 56.



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