



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Faithful Eating
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 36-42)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Allelon Community Garden
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 73-77)
- 📖 Women's Broken Bodies in God's Broken Earth
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 78-80)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Faithful Eating

The food we eat, both what we eat and how we eat it, may be the most significant witness to creation care we perform. With every 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. In our global, industrial food economy, has our eating become a desecration to God?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 104:21-35

Reflection

"Though surely a physiological act, eating is also an ecological, agricultural, moral, and spiritual act," Norman Wirzba observes. "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."

When it comes to eating, in some ways we live in the best of times. Supermarkets are stocked year-round with a range of attractive and inexpensive foods. Food television networks help us explore exotic world cuisines. Though we rightly worry about pockets of food insecurity, more food calories are available to most people than ever before. We have much to be thankful for.

But there is a serious downside to our way of eating: most of us are increasingly disconnected from the production of food, and this is harming us (we are less grateful for food, less aware of its true cost) and the creation as a whole. "These copious and cheap calories are coming at a very high price to our soils, waters, atmosphere, animals, and agricultural workers," Wirzba writes. "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."

Wirzba commends four steps toward more faithful eating:

- ▶ *Develop a proper relationship to food.* Adam and Eve's sinfully eating fruit from the forbidden tree "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," Wirzba explains. "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."
- ▶ *Learn about the damage caused by the industrial food system.* Sinful, death-dealing eating is not a theological abstraction in today's



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economy. Animals are raised in cruel conditions, fisheries are harvested to exhaustion, water resources are wasted, soils are eroded and damaged by herbicides, world farmers are squeezed by higher seed and fertilizer costs, and they suffer higher cancer rates when they must work with toxic chemicals (often banned in the U.S.). “Viewed ecologically, today’s industrial food production represents a system that is unparalleled in its destructiveness.”

- ▶ *Become involved in food’s production.* This allows us “to deeply sense – with our hands, noses, eyes, and mouths – the fragility, patience, beauty, pain, and miracle that the growth of food is,” Wirzba suggests. “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.”
- ▶ *Support local and sustainable food economies.* By eating locally produced foods, we can save fossil fuels required to preserve and ship foods a great distance, eat tastier and more nutritional foods, and check that they are produced in ways “that treats the land, water, plants, animals, and agricultural workers in a just and God-honoring manner,” Wirzba writes. We can also lobby government for “a Farm Bill that redirects taxpayer dollars to regenerative and natural systems agriculture and away from industrial and exploitative production.”

Wirzba concludes, “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.”

Study Questions

1. How are eating decisions one of our most significant witnesses to creation care? In today’s food economy, why is it difficult for us to know the full impact of those decisions?
2. What practical steps can you take to adjust how you eat in order to honor God by caring for the creation?
3. “In places where the earth is broken by environmental degradation, people are also broken,” Melissa Browning notes. How does her experience with the women fish-sellers on the shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania illustrate the environmental and human damage of industrial food production?
4. According to Elizabeth Sands Wise, what are the potential benefits of a congregational garden?
5. Discuss other ways that your congregation can support local and sustainable food production. What would be the potential benefits to both members and the wider community?

Departing Hymn: “Feed Me, O Lord, with Needful Food”

Feed me, O Lord, with needful food;
I ask not wealth or fame.
Give me an eye to see your will,
a heart to bless your name.

The Philadelphia Hymn Book (1819)

Tune: DUNDEE

Faithful Eating

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Genesis 3:1-13, 21-24	Psalms 104:24-35
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Explore a congregational garden project
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the food we eat and how we eat it is a significant witness to creation care.
2. To outline steps we can take toward more faithful eating practices.
3. To discuss how your congregation can encourage faithful eating.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Feed Me, O Lord, with Needful Food” locate the familiar tune DUNDEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“A few dozen church members stood outside Faith Baptist Church in Georgetown, Kentucky, on a blustery Sunday afternoon, dress shoes perched in the freshly tilled soil,” Elizabeth Sands Wise recalls. “Toddlers meandered freely about, and senior citizens were sprinkled among the twenty- and thirty-somethings who had decided to get their hands dirty at church. We had gathered to dedicate a garden.

“Within weeks, the two plots of tilled-up soil were transformed from dirt into garden, thanks in part to the donation of compost from a local family farm, and the hands of the youth group on the church’s annual service project day. We had a fence to keep the rabbits out, bark mulch for paths, a host of tender plants breaking through the soil, and an outer border of marigolds to fend off mosquitoes. We were optimistic – perhaps too optimistic.” The water faucet was too far away from the garden, the volunteers were too few, and the neighborhood rabbits ate more than their fair share of the produce.

However, by working side-by-side in their garden, church members formed a better community. Sands Wise notes, “Relationships are different when they come together over dirt and sweat, rather than donuts and coffee.” The church gardeners discovered that as individuals they were more vulnerable before one another, and together more productive.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide you to care for the creation through the foods you choose to eat and how you eat them.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 104:21-35 from a modern translation.

Reflection

As we learn to appreciate and value the interwoven created order, we will be more drawn into God’s plan to care for it, both its cultivated and uncultivated parts. This study focuses on caring for an important aspect of the human cultivated landscape – the farms and fisheries, domesticated plants and animals, and natural resources from which we produce food. Norman Wirzba warns that today’s industrial food system is harming the creation

and is unsustainable. He suggests practical steps to become more aware of how our eating patterns impact creation.

If your group would like to extend their study of faithful eating, you might explore the damage caused to the creation by the industrial food economy in the first session and then discuss how your congregation can encourage more faithful eating in a second session.

Study Questions

1. Our eating decisions – what we eat and when and how we eat it, the amount we will pay for it, etc. – influence the demand for food products. This in turn influences how resources of water and land are used around the world, how plants are cultivated (and modified), how farm animals are cared for, how food products are preserved, shipped, stored, and packaged, how chemicals are used in the production of food, and how food workers are treated.
It's difficult to gauge the impact of our decisions because we know so little about how food is produced. "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...it is common to think that food is a commodity responsive primarily to the dictates of money," Norman Wirzba writes. "Never before have so few known with sufficient detail where food comes from and how it is sustainably and justly produced."
2. Form four groups to brainstorm specific steps members can take to implement Wirzba's suggestions to think theologically about our proper relation to food, learn about the damage caused by today's industrial food economy, become involved in food's production, and support local and sustainable food economies. Encourage them to develop one of their ideas. How will they find the expertise they need (from a church member, outside resource person, information in books or on the Internet, etc.), and how will they support one another?
3. While doing research on HIV/AIDS in Tanzania, Melissa Browning interviewed women "fish-sellers who worked along the shores of Lake Victoria. This massive lake, which connects three countries in East Africa, has become environmentally degraded through overfishing and the export-based fish industry. The introduction of large fish for export, such as Nile Perch, have eliminated hundreds of species of fish native to the lake and destroyed biodiversity," she explains. "Along the lake in Bondo, Kenya, women fish-sellers trade sex for fish to sell in the market. Women who refuse to participate in this sex-for-trade system may not be given fish to sell at the market, a place on the bus going to the market, or a space at the market to sell the fish." Ask members to mention other cases in which industrial food production, inadvertently perhaps, damages the environment and harms food workers.
4. Elizabeth Sands Wise lists four benefits of a congregational garden as (1) an *intergenerational ministry* with members of all ages working together in appropriate ways, (2) an *avenue for outreach* to neighbors as church members share fresh produce with them, (3) a *resource to feed local people who are underresourced for fresh produce*, and (4) a *teaching tool for the congregation and its neighbors* to learn the joys of producing food and appreciate the role food plays in biblical stories. The mission statement for Allelon Community Garden is "to serve Jesus Christ and to nourish the family of Faith by cultivating Sabbath relationships among church members and those around us, by being a teaching tool for Christian formation, and by growing healthy food for the hungry and for the enjoyment of all." Sands Wise notes the relationship cultivated among members through the work of the garden is the most significant benefit.
5. A congregation might share seasonal recipes that incorporate locally grown foods, offer classes in food nutrition or gardening, host a farmer's market, feature fresh local produce in its congregational meals, start a produce exchange program for home gardeners, provide financial assistance to poorer members to buy local products, sponsor field trips to local food production facilities, invite local farmers to share their concerns, etc. The benefits of these activities might be similar to those listed above for a congregational garden.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.