



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Eating Well
(*Health*, pp. 27-34)

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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Eating Well

Eating well is not just about what we put into our mouths. Far more, it is about the complex ways we attend to the health of our bodies, our spirits, our communities, and our planet. Eating well requires that we hunger and thirst after righteousness – for then, and only then, will we be fully satisfied.

Prayer: 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 25:6-9 and Mark 1:1-8

Reflection

Creating a biblical diet book from passages such as these might seem like an impossible project. Where would you put John's locust-and-wild-honey recipes – before or after Isaiah's chapter on straining well-aged wines and grilling rich meats?

Yet the Christian year gives us a rhythm of fasting and feasting that honors Scripture's wealth of guidance. In seasons of Lent and Advent and on certain days we eat simply, with intentional stewardship of our bodies and the world's resources. Then our days of fasting are wonderfully punctuated with holy celebrations – like Christmas, Easter, and local feast days – that remind us "that pleasure in and gratitude for the good gifts of our Creator stand as hallmarks of a fully embodied devotional life."

As Mary Louise Bringle explores what it means for us to "eat well" in a culture of abundance, she discovers seven paradoxes:

- ▶ *We should eat with pleasure, but restraint.* We fully enjoy eating in its proper time, for there are "times to be concerned with feeding ourselves healthfully and joyously, and times to be concerned with feeding our neighbors as ourselves."
- ▶ *While most enjoy plenty of food, nearly 12% of U.S. households are "food insecure."* "Eating – that seemingly most personal act – is thus rife with political implications," Bringle observes. "Should we simply stop buying our low-fat, low-carb, low-calorie foods and spend the money we save in efforts to eradicate hunger? If only solutions were so straightforward."
- ▶ *The more we try to control our weight, the less we succeed.* As a population, Americans need to lose weight (about two-thirds of adults are overweight, and one-third are obese), but our dieting is part of the problem. "Sadly, our size-obsessed culture seems to produce two categories of people: those whose yo-yoing efforts at short-term weight loss result in longer-term weight gain and all its related ailments, and those whose overreaching efforts at weight loss result in emaciation and a host of other mental and physical consequences."
- ▶ *Our primary motive for dieting does not produce spiritual and physical shalom.* Aiming for an ideal slenderness, we do not respond to the call to fitness and total-body flourishing, but we pursue diets that promise to remove five pounds. Even "faith-based" diets send the



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wrong message: “by touting weight loss (and even, in some cases, condemning certain body sizes as clear signs of sinfulness), they feed into the very preoccupations they aim to combat.”

- ▶ *God both does and does not care how we eat.* We are called to care for and honor our bodies, but God does not love us based on our physical size. Furthermore, since we cannot “know the metabolic or other challenges our neighbors are dealing with in their personal approach to food,” writes Bringle, “it seems a form of ‘false witness’ to judge any particular body weight as clear evidence of ‘disobedience.’”
- ▶ *We both are and are not to blame for how our food-lives have spun out of control.* Yes, we live in a toxic *cultural* milieu where menu portions are “supersized” and body images of beauty are “micro-sized.” Our *physical* surroundings are toxic, with “sleep deprivation, certain medications, and ‘endocrine disruptors’ in synthetic environmental chemicals that contribute to hormonal changes affecting our appetite and weight.” But it is the old paradox of original sin: “Innocent, we are born into an environment that invites us to feed ourselves poorly, to obsess about eating and dieting, to abuse our health in multiple ways. Guilty, we accede to the invitation.”
- ▶ *What we eat (and weigh) may seem like a personal problem, but it can only have a cultural solution.* Rather than joining another weight-loss program, we need to adopt a more multifaceted approach to eating well: (1) replacing unrealistic media images of beauty with “a new image of beauty as *vibrancy*, as vigorous flourishing” of a variety of body types; (2) honoring “our dependency on one another and on the earth”; and (3) cultivating “a deepened spirituality of mindfulness” that overcomes our “mistaken conviction that consuming goods will ever fill the empty places in our God-hungry hearts.”

Study Questions

1. When it comes to eating well, what does it mean to practice stewardship with regard to our bodies? To world resources?
2. What is wrong, according to Bringle, with the most common motive for dieting—to achieve an ideal slenderness?
3. Is there a difference between times of fasting and feasting (in the Christian calendar) and a cycle of dieting and bingeing?
4. Do you agree that eating well requires a *cultural* solution? Discuss the “multifaceted approach” that Bringle recommends. Would you add other components?

Departing Hymn: “Jesus, Our Lord and King” (verses 1 and 4)

Jesus, our Lord and King,
to you our praises rise;
to you our bodies we present,
a living sacrifice.

Baptized into your death,
with you again we rise,
to newness of a life of faith,
to new and endless joys.

Anonymous

Suggested Tunes: ST. THOMAS or FESTAL SONG

Eating Well

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how eating well involves stewardship both of our bodies and of the world's resources.
2. To consider why so many Americans are overweight, obese, or suffering from eating disorders in a culture of relative abundance.
3. To discuss how the Christian calendar can guide us to spiritually and physically healthy attitudes toward eating.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Health (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Jesus, Our Lord and King" locate the familiar tune ST. THOMAS or FESTAL SONG in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Mel Bringle begins with this scenario: "Roger and Sally have just returned from a holiday cruise, booked for them by members of their family as an anniversary present. 'How was it?' their children clamor, eager for a report on their gift.

"'I'll tell you one thing,' Roger replies. 'We sure *ate well!* Everywhere we turned on that ship, there was food and more food....' He pats his stomach contentedly, remembering the delights.

"The next morning, one of Sally's friends telephones to get another update on the adventure. Sally, too, pats her stomach as she ponders her response, but in an emotion closer to dismay than satisfaction. 'Oh, the cruise was a lot of fun,' she reports, 'but just between the two of us, I don't feel as if I've *eaten well* in weeks! All that high-calorie food constantly available, and so little opportunity for exercising it off...'" (*Health*, p. 27).

What does it mean for us to eat well? And why do we struggle to eat well in our culture?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Isaiah 25:6-9 and Mark 1:1-8 from a modern translation.

Reflection

It is increasingly difficult for us to eat well, even though we live in a culture of relative abundance. We can use Mary Louise Bringle's exploration of this paradox to bring our moral reflection on healthcare to a particular and concrete focus. For example, the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity, especially in developed countries, suggests we have an inadequate biomedical concept of health and misguided priorities in healthcare. Furthermore, Bringle calls us not only to examine the distortions in our *personal* attitudes about food, but also to critique our disordered *cultural* milieu and *physical* surroundings. In this way, she helps us to understand the complexity of sin and the social context of the virtue of temperance. Finally, she points forward to the ways that families and congregations can be an agents of God's healing by bringing spiritual and physical shalom to members with distressing food lives.

You might extend your reflection on eating well by reading several articles in the *Food and Hunger* issue of *Christian Reflection*. For instance, Thomas Hibbs discusses the ancient virtue of temperance and the true joy of eating in “Hungry Souls”; Marie Griffith critiques faith-based diet programs in “Heavenly Hunger”; and Jack Marcum gives a statistical overview of patterns and trends of hunger in the world and discusses the opinions by American Christians on hunger-related issues in “Who’s Hungry and Who Cares?” These articles and their associated study guides are available for free download in the Ethics Library at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

Study Questions

1. We are stewards of our bodies when we eat in ways that promote our spiritual, mental, and physical well-being. Not only is it unhealthy to eat too much (or little) and too often (or infrequently), it is also unhealthy to eat with the wrong goals – to impress others with our “taste,” to display our wealth, to distract ourselves from problems, and so on. It is unhealthy to eat alone – either literally when we eat by ourselves, or relationally when we eat among others but are isolated from their company and concerns by our pickiness about cuisine, fastidiousness with gourmet preparation, or (even) obsession with good nutrition.

Our wholeness involves recognition of our dependency on other creatures, our neighbors, and God. We can be stewards of the planet’s resources by “putting money aside from less healthy food purchases to feed hungry children; eating lower on the food chain in order to minimize pain to others of God’s creatures and maximize the yield of the land; and recognizing that when we recycle, purchase food without unnecessary packaging, and use water and fossil fuels as sparingly as possible, we help to combat the environmental toxicity that makes it difficult for others – particularly, for future generations – to eat well.”

2. The popular ideal of slenderness is unrealistic for many people; instead of being so “size-obsessed,” Bringle says, we should celebrate the health and vibrancy of the variety of bodies that God created. The obsession with slenderness fosters two patterns of disordered eating. On the one hand, we adopt diets that “play havoc with our metabolism as well as our mental health: instead of training us in sustainable lifestyle change, they create a psychology of deprivation which almost inevitably leads to rebound self-indulgence.” On the other, for some people such “diets work all too well, setting in motion the life-threatening dynamics of a serious eating disorder like anorexia nervosa. Then, what begins as a simple weight-loss diet escalates into an acute fear of being fat and an overpowering desire to be ‘thin’ and ‘in control,’ with the two states perceived as synonymous with one another.”
3. Despite a superficial similarity between the Christian calendar and a cycle of dieting and bingeing – in both there are times of eating less and times of eating more – the crucial differences between them become obvious when we consider *how, why, when, and what* we eat in each case. Invite small groups to explore these four dimensions.
4. Bringle outlines three facets of a cultural solution: (1) critiquing the unrealistic standard of beauty promoted in the media; (2) promoting an image of beauty as vibrancy; and (3) eating in ways that would honor the hungry and respect the world’s resources. To accomplish these goals, we need the support of families and faith communities that (4) “cultivate...a deepened spirituality of mindfulness and patience” in regard to eating. You might divide members into four groups – three groups to brainstorm specific ways for their families and congregations to participate in the first three facets of the solution, and a fourth group to consider how the Christian calendar, spiritual reading, fasting, and other practices in the Christian tradition can foster mindfulness and patience in regard to eating.

Departing Hymn

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