

A call for a thoughtful approach to food in a hungry world

Eat, Pray,

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Back in the eighties when Haiti lifted tariffs on imported foods like rice and vegetables, food became cheaper, and people ate better. That seemed good, but the unintended consequence of the newly affordable and abundant food was that local farmers struggled against the cheap competition and many eventually went bankrupt. Few people outside Haiti noticed.

That is, until last fall. With failed harvests, rising fuel prices, and the diversion of grains toward biofuel production driving up the cost of imports, food became prohibitively expensive. With local farming depressed, Haitians were forced to drastically lower their standards. Many resorted to eating dirt.

Production of mud cakes, which are exactly what they sounds like—pancakes made of clay and water intended for human consumption—rose in Haiti last fall. Although the cakes stave off hunger, even their producers did not exaggerate their appeal.

“You eat them when you have to,” said a businesswoman named Marie.

The hunger crisis may have faded from headlines for now, but experts believe it is far from over. This year’s harvests are likely to be dramatically reduced. Increasing costs and the global financial crisis that diminished credit availability for farmers resulted in fewer acres planted and, eventually, lower production. Severe droughts in China and Latin America compound the problem. It is only a matter of time before prices escalate, potentially leading to more food riots this fall. Food shortage has become a global issue that does not appear to be going away anytime soon.

Food Is Controversial

Most of us don’t like to think about people suffering, even starving, and it’s distinctly uncomfortable to consider that much of the suffering is caused by corrupt economic policies, some of which include American food aid programs that have often benefited American businesses and politicians more than hungry people.

Part of the reason we don’t like to think about these things is because we

don’t have answers to these complex issues. I certainly don’t. But I do know that food is controversial and it has been from the beginning.

Take a look in Genesis. Adam and Eve’s fall from Eden was precipitated by a controversy over food. The consequences of that fall corresponded to the sin of rejecting God’s good provision and allowing the appetite to govern action. Because of the fall, God’s provision for life would now come with a price: Eve would suffer to bring forth children, and Adam would sweat to procure food.

Maybe food is not the neutral issue that we Christians often assume it is.

It’s true that all of those quirky Old Testament prohibitions against eating any animal that “chews the cud, [but] does not have divided hoofs” (see Leviticus 11:4) are obsolete for those in Christ for whom, as Paul puts it, “All things are lawful” (1 Corinthians 10:23). This is, for the most part, our position when it comes to food: food is lawful, God is good, we are grateful.

It’s good to give thanks, but I think we probably fall short of God’s glory in our attitudes about food. Gratitude and feasting are only part of a bibli-



Share

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cal perspective on food. God's word also calls us to loving consideration, sharing, and restraint—themes found throughout Scripture.

In the Old Testament, laws govern the sharing of harvest first fruits and direct Jewish harvesters to leave produce in their fields for the needy. The law dictates which foods could be eaten and when, and Proverbs counsels against gluttony and excess.

The New Testament, while less focused on law, basically agrees with the Old Testament purposes of compassion for others through personal restraint. Paul specifically admonishes believers to watch what they eat on at

least two occasions. The first has to do with respecting the consciences of others, and Paul writes in Romans 14, "I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But...if your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love" (vv. 14-15, TNIV).

Paul is even more passionate in his first letter to the Corinthians. "I have no praise for you," he writes, having learned that factions had developed and the "approved" believers were eating first and eating better than others (11:17, TNIV). As a result, some were going hungry at what was then

a community meal. At a gathering commemorating Christ's sacrifice, this was appalling. In both instances, Paul urges restraint and consideration for the other as a demonstration of Christian love. In another letter, Paul advises generosity, encouraging the Corinthians to give according to their means so that their abundance might supply the need of the church in Jerusalem (see 2 Corinthians 9).

The Bible, far from being food neutral, advocates personal restraint, social awareness, and corporate gen-

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erosity. We are called to thanksgiving, yes—not merely for abundant food and satisfied appetites, but also for the grace of God that allows us to share abundantly as well.

That’s why it is important to realize that though we do not have easy answers, we cannot ignore the present plight of 850 million chronically hungry people.

Food Is Communal

Part of the reason we’re inclined to do just that is that we mistakenly see food as a matter of personal choice only. We often believe that eating is an activity that is not particularly relevant to our spiritual health. We see it as a morally neutral activity.

Certainly spiritual writers through the ages have made the connection between food and spirituality, but

you were eating someone else’s share. That’s why food is so important in Scripture: it is not merely a personal or spiritual issue, it is a social and moral issue as well.

Food Challenges Us

Food challenges anyone who desires to live the life of obedience, because food is a physical need for which we are cued by a natural appetite. Ever since Adam and Eve, people have craved food that was not good for them to eat. It requires self-control—

itself a fruit of the Holy Spirit—to hold ourselves in check. Which is where gluttony comes in. Gluttony isn’t just about one’s physical well-being or one’s spiritual life, although gluttony certainly has implications for these areas. But gluttony has implications for the larger

good intention to return to God; it is another to take steps to actively deny the self and practice obedience in earnest, putting yourself in a position where you’re ready to hear God’s will and participate in it.

Participating in that will connects us with God’s people because obedience generally has both social and spiritual implications. Participating in God’s will is the specific activity that results in unity, reconciliation, and justice.

Simple Steps We Can Take

So, what are we as Christians supposed to do?

We need to recognize that the inability to solve a global problem is no excuse for ignoring the issue. To a certain extent, as Christians in North America, we are the modern equivalent of the factional Corinthians, feasting while our brothers and sisters go without. Now, I don’t believe that God wills that any go hungry, so starving ourselves is not the answer. Still, it is clear that the church needs to heed the consistent biblical call to restrain our insatiable appetites and practice compassion.

A few suggestions may be helpful.

First, don’t feel guilty about eating. Food is a necessity. The Christian response to God’s provision is gratitude, not guilt. Not only does guilt crowd out gratitude, guilt is powerless to fill empty bellies. So whatever your response to God’s call to responsibly deal with food, don’t allow guilt to have any part in it.

Instead, repent. As God’s people, we are called to repent of sinful attitudes about food. But, we can’t do this alone. We need to pray together for guidance and encourage one another in our attempts to be faithful.

Next, eat simpler. Proverbs 15:17 says, “Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it.” If you’re not sure where to start, try cutting back on meats, dairy, or desserts. When I lived

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even these attitudes overlook the fact that food affects every aspect of life. Our attitudes regarding food can’t be limited to personal, private, and inward effects on our own bodies and souls because food is fundamentally communal in nature.

Food is and always has been gathered and harvested, produced and consumed in communities. Food necessarily connects us with our neighbors. But food also connects us with God. Because 100 percent of the food we consume comes from God’s hand—it is God’s provision.

This is the way biblical writers considered food. Food was a limited good in ancient Mediterranean cultures. There was only so much to go around. Whatever the harvest for the year, whatever the catch for the day, that was it. There was no more food to be had. You couldn’t just buy more at Sam’s Club. Everyone had to share what there was. Eating more than your fair share necessarily meant that

community as well.

Gluttony is the sin of heeding and obeying the appetite rather than God. It is about being a slave to the gut, whether that means being compelled to eat a bucket of ice cream or to stick to an ascetic diet to maintain a certain weight. Either way, it’s being governed by the god of the gut rather than the God of loving justice. Gluttony eats away at healthy relationships with God, ourselves, and with other people.

If gluttony has to do with being disconnected from God’s will, fasting is the time-honored spiritual discipline designed for reconnecting. When Nathan made King David aware of his sin in the matter of Uriah and his wife in 2 Samuel 12, David fasted. He fasted and prayed, and he did so in order to reconnect with God. Like prayer, fasting is how we seek to reconnect ourselves with God’s will. And it is a powerful connector in that regard. It’s one thing to have the

in Guatemala, my house-mom served black beans every night, and to my recollection, we never ate dessert. I wasn't too sure about the menu at first, but in time I came to appreciate our simple dinners.

Consider eating less. Most of us eat large portions and snack between meals. Try eating less meat or stretching it further in recipes, reducing meal portions, or foregoing seconds. Cut out a regular snack time, or substitute a mint for dessert. Another trick is to drink a glass of water or cup of tea when you get "the munchies." You may even consider fasting. It might not be a popular practice, but it is a biblical one.

Last November, our church hosted a rice and beans dinner instead of our typical Wednesday night potluck. Members were invited—but not obligated—to consider fasting beforehand. Those who had fasted praised

the meal, which was similar to the simple fare millions eat every day, as tastier than they'd expected.

Finally, share. It's important to set goals for both eating and sharing because, although sharing out of our abundance is fine and good, we also need to adjust our behavior in compassionate response to the lack of others. So long as we continue in gluttonous patterns, we are living in disobedience and disconnection from God's purposes. So set realistic goals for obedience, and be clear: if your goal is vague, like "cut back," you won't achieve much. Set a clear and realistic challenge, like setting aside \$20 of your weekly food budget by eliminating desserts. Then share. Support a local food bank, Covenant World Relief, or another food ministry.

The image of Haitians eating clay has been God's call to me out of

complacency, but I have no delusions about the impact of my meager offerings on a problem this big. Even so, I'm convinced that God can multiply the effects of obedience. Certainly God knows how to multiply bread. And while many budgets these days are stretched thin already, I believe that God can multiply our food budgets, and that he will do so by stretching us—to eat less finickily, less wantonly, or just plain less.

Nutrition experts have told us to eat more simply and less for years, and they have advised us to do so for our own good. This may be good advice, but it is not mine. As Christians, we must be clear that our goal is not improving our own health but the health of others. Our call is to eat as we live: obediently and with restraint, consideration, and generosity. ■