Food, Christian Identity and Global Warming: A Pauline Call for a Christian Food Taboo

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Abstract
Meals and food were clearly important in establishing early Christian identity, and Paul stresses two principles that govern Christian practice: that food can only be eaten in an orientation of thanksgiving to God, and that care must be taken concerning the effects of eating on others. In some cases, he insists, this may require Christians to abstain from certain foods. Given the scale of the damage caused by greenhouse gases arising from global livestock production, it is argued here that Christians now have an urgent responsibility to reduce greatly, or even cease, their consumption of meat.

Keywords
global warming, food, meat, meals, Paul, Christian ethics

Introduction: Food and Meals in Early Christianity

It is one of the remarkable facts about Christianity that it has never to this day developed any universally or even commonly practised food taboos. Other major world religions (Judaism; Islam; Hinduism; Buddhism) have more or less clearly defined rules in relation to diet – for instance, abstention from certain kinds of meat, from meat of animals slaughtered in the wrong way, or even from all meats. In the case of Christianity, the absence of food taboos is all the more remarkable given that its roots lie in Judaism, whose very precise food rules are enshrined in divine laws still retained within the Christian Scriptures (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). The Jewish food rules, and in particular abstinence from pork, were very well known in antiquity, a frequent subject of enquiry, amusement or disdain by non-Jews, who wondered what on earth pigs were for if they were not meant to be eaten.[2] This pork-taboo, and the Jewish anxiety about contamination by Gentile 'idolatry', combined to make it very difficult for Jews to share meals with non-Jews: they could be hosts, perhaps, but given the requirement of *reciprocity* in giving and sharing hospitality, it was difficult to

[1] A public lecture given at Regent College, Vancouver in July 2009; I am very grateful for comments and questions received after the lecture, and to Professor David Horrell for critical questions and further suggestions; I have retained the general format of the lecture with its informal, oral style.

[2] See, e.g., Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 361-62; Plutarch, *Quaestiones Conviviales* 4.5; further texts in M. Whittaker, *Jews and Christians: Graeco-Roman Views* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 73-80.

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cement friendships across ethnic boundaries by meal-fellowship, and the resulting separatism caused Jews to be regarded at times as unfriendly and anti-social.[3] As any anthropologist will tell you, meals and dietary laws are crucial markers of social identity and social boundaries: what you eat, whom you eat with, what hierarchies, inclusions and exclusions are established at the meal table, these are all fundamental components of social relations.[4] Jews knew very well that their dietary laws distinguished them from non-Jews, and on the whole celebrated the fact. As the Mosaic laws indicate, the food rules 'sanctify' the Jewish nation (Lev 11.44-45; 20.24-26); according to the Letter of Aristeas (2nd century BCE), they establish 'impenetrable fences and iron walls' between Jews and non-Jews (*Aristeas* 139-42). It is striking that early Christianity, with its roots in this tradition, quickly abandoned any such attempt to demarcate and protect its vulnerable identity.

There are signs that this abandonment of food taboos became, in fact, a point of special importance to some early Christian thinkers. Luke records in Acts, with special emphasis, Peter's struggle in overcoming his food-taboos, in the vision of the sheet let down from heaven, and filled with unclean animals which he is instructed to eat (Acts 10-11). For Luke this is a symbol of the overcoming of boundaries, not just in eating with Gentiles, but also in welcoming uncircumcised, un-Judaised Gentiles into the Christian community.[5] Although the Apostolic Decree, recorded in Acts 15.20 (cf. 15.29), contains residual dietary restrictions – not eating food offered to idols, or meat improperly slaughtered, retaining the blood – Luke clearly regards the divinely-granted success of the Gentile mission as a sign and legitimation of the abandonment of the crucial Jewish distinction between clean and unclean foods. At the same time Colossians pours scorn on those who impose rules concerning food and drink (Col 2.16, 21), and First Timothy castigates, as the doctrines of demons, any teaching that enjoins abstinence from foods, on the grounds that everything created by God is good, and is to be enjoyed so long as it is received with thanksgiving, made holy by the word of God and prayer (1 Tim 4.1-4). In the second century, the *Epistle to Diognetus* (author unknown) criticises Jews for their 'anxieties over food', on the grounds that it is ridiculous to accept some parts of God's creation as good, and others as useless and superfluous; he celebrates the fact that Christians are *not* differentiated from others by their food, or by their clothes: they simply follow local customs in what they wear and eat, and in the rest of their lives (4.1-2; 5.4). Precisely by being omnivorous, it seems, the early Christians claimed to be a universal, boundary-crossing community; they grounded their food habits in the doctrine of a universal creation of equally good things, which mirrored their practice of all-inclusive communities.

At first glance this looks like a religious tradition that has deliberately lost touch with the physical and social dimensions of life symbolised and encapsulated in food. But then we recall that at the same time that the early Christian movement largely repudiated food taboos it invested very great significance in meals, and in one sort of meal in particular, the Lord's Supper. Whenever you see signs of conflict in a religious tradition, you know that much is at stake, and it is therefore significant that the Gospels record great controversy over Jesus' practice of table-fellowship (e.g. Mark 2.15-17; Luke 15.1-2; 19.7) and that one of the biggest and most significant disputes in early Christianity occurred between Paul and Peter at Antioch, over the eating of common meals (Gal 2.11-14). In both cases, the issue is meal-company and what is implied by the inclusion of non-standard company at the meal table. Such stories indicate, if we did not already know, that Christian community was importantly established in shared meals, the 'breaking of bread' which Luke records as the habitual practice of the first Christians (Acts 2.46). And of course *the* meal that most definitively established common Christian identity was the Lord's Supper, whose origins were traced to Jesus' last meal before his death, the meal which recalled his self-giving on the cross, and which looked forward explicitly to the eschaton, the hope which sustained early Christians through suffering and social ridicule (Mark 14.22-25 and parallels; 1 Cor 11.24-27). Here, interestingly, the food shared *is* significant, though not for its difference from other people's food but because the bread and

[3] See, e.g., Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 33; J.M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE – 117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 434-37.

[4] See especially C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); R.C. Wood, *The Sociology of the Meal* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

[5] See P.F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 71-109.

the wine signify something very specific about the body of Christ given and the blood of Christ shed. Here Christian identity is formed not by the exclusion of foods or people, but by the intensification of meaning in ordinary food, the Christological redefinition of a common meal. If anthropologists are famously adept at 'deciphering a meal',[6] here they would and do find rich material in which to trace the formation of Christian identity in hospitality or welcome, in meal-sharing, in food-consumption, in the focused concentration on bread and wine, in the formal pronouncement of the meaning of the meal – all identity-forming ritual practices that helped to offset the fact that, as a cross-cultural community, Christians did *not* practise in common any food taboos to distinguish themselves from non-Christians.[7]

Enough by way of scene-setting. My focus in this essay will not be on the Lord's Supper, though it will not be entirely absent, but on a set of fascinating debates about food in Paul's letters and their implications for us today. These debates indicate that, in their discussions about food, the first Christians were grappling with some fundamental questions about Christian identity, about how they related to non-Christians and about how they could, or could not, allow cultural diversity among themselves. We will trace out the principles that Paul draws from these discussions concerning Christians' relationship to the Lord, and their relationship to one another. I will conclude by arguing, on the basis of these same principles, that in the present environmental crisis Christianity *should* develop a food taboo, or near taboo, in a way it has never done before in its 2,000-year history. This novelty, I will argue, is an urgent and a necessary component of Christian ethics in our current global context.

Food Does Not Matter – Or Does It?

At several points in 1 Corinthians Paul shows a kind of nonchalance about food which suggests that he has fundamentally removed food from the category of things that matter in Christian practice. At the end of chapter 6 he indicates that sex very much *does* matter – at least, sex with a prostitute is wholly incompatible with the belonging of the body to the Lord – but he appears to contrast this bodily issue with that of food, declaring that 'food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy both one and the other' (1 Cor 6.13). (Even if part of this statement is a slogan from the Corinthian church, as some suggest, Paul makes no effort to correct it.) A little later, while discussing food offered to idols, he declares as a general principle. 'Food will not commend us to God; we are no worse off if we do not eat it and no better off if we do' (1 Cor 8.8). This seems to place food in the category of 'indifferent things', like the Stoic notion of *adiaphora*, things that might be preferable in certain circumstances but fundamentally do not matter either way. One cannot imagine a law-observant Jew saying any such thing, and indeed in the same context Paul declares that, though he can live like a Jew among Jews, he can also live as if without the law among those without the law, being fundamentally obliged only to Christ (1 Cor 9.21). This seems to suggest a drastic reduction in the range of things that matter to Christian identity, as if in the whole sphere of food the Christian movement is in principle culturally non-specific. When Paul later quotes Psalm 24, that 'the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it' in order to justify buying and eating whatever is sold in the meat-market (1 Cor 10.25-26), we have a clear theological warrant for declaring food a non-issue for Christian believers.

Or do we? This citation of the Psalm comes immediately after Paul has issued strong warnings against 'idolatry' and declared that it is out of the question to partake of 'the table of the Lord' and 'the table of *daimonia*' (1 Cor 10.20-22). Although some consider Paul wholly self-contradictory at this point, I think what he is arguing is perfectly clear and coherent. Paul knows that many kinds of foodstuffs were offered to beings that others called deities (with Greek, Roman or local, indigenous names) and that he calls *daimonia* (supernatural beings that he refuses to dignify with the title 'Gods'). At temple altars, in temple dining rooms (the restaurants of antiquity), at cross-roads and in private homes before small-scale shrines, many different foods – grain, cakes, fruit, meat, and liquid-samples poured on the ground in a libation – were regularly offered in dedication to the deities, sanctifying both that food and the larger meal of which it was a part.[8]

[6] M. Douglas, 'Deciphering a Meal' in her *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975) 249-75.

[7] See, on the social formation of Christian identity, G. Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (London: SCM, 1999).

[8] See, e.g., D. Newton, *Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 175-257.

The issue here for Paul is not the foodstuffs themselves – they are neutral, or rather, they are created by God and always potentially returned to God in thanksgiving – but the *context* in which they are consumed. To be more specific, what concerns Paul is what we might call the *orientation* of the food and of its consumption. If food is regarded, and eaten, in orientation to *daimonia*, it cannot be oriented to God, and thus what comes from God and belongs to him ('the earth is the Lord's and everything in it') is blasphemously redirected away from God to something or someone other. This is why Paul finishes the discussion of this delicate matter by insisting that it is permissible to eat any food, so long as one can do so *with thanksgiving* (*eucharistia*): 'whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God' (1 Cor 10.30-31). The act of thanksgiving – saying 'grace', which means just that – orients the food back to the giver, and orients the eaters likewise.

Thus, far from being completely irrelevant, food, or rather the dedication and orientation of food, emerges as a site of strategic importance for Christian identity. What goes on at the meal-table declares in very fundamental terms who you are. For Paul and his contemporaries, drawing this line at the meal-table made a huge social difference, as it required them to absent themselves from a large range of social occasions which were inextricably bound up with worship to pagan deities. Scholars continue to argue quite how large that range was, and no doubt there was room for difference of opinion about what meals with sacrifices signified and who exactly was involved in the worship to *daimonia*, but the warnings Paul issues indicate that everything is at stake for the Christian in this question of the orientation of the food and its consumption.[9] Paul is pressing here for a definition of Christian identity founded not on categories of forbidden or permitted foods, but on a life-hermeneutic, a way of interpreting practice that asks of every object, including food, and of every act, including eating, whether or not it is directed in thanksgiving to God.[10] We may be reminded of George Herbert's famous poem (now a hymn):

> Teach me, my God and King,
> In all things thee to see;
> And what I do in anything,
> To do it as for thee.

As George Herbert goes on, 'A servant with this clause, makes drudgery divine; who sweeps a room as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine.' In other words (to turn Herbert's poetry into dreary prose!), this life-hemeneutic can and should touch every sphere and station in life. But Paul knows that it requires also careful scrutiny of every object and every action: *can* this be performed in thanksgiving to God? Those of us who live in Western cultures are not daily confronted with this question in relation to food offered to 'idols', but there may be other features of food, and food consumption, that will make us uncomfortable if placed under the spotlight of that question.

Moreover, there is a second feature of food consumption that causes Paul to qualify his apparent nonchalance regarding food, and this follows directly on from the first. Paul knows that there may be occasions and contexts where some Christians can eat the meal set before them in a way that is entirely directed to the Lord, but other Christians, present at the same meal, cannot do so, since for them the food involves them inextricably in worship of some other deity (1 Cor 8.7-12). There may be various reasons for this difference – cultural, social, educational, or psychological – but Paul refuses to scorn those who have greater sensitivities on this matter. He knows how much is at stake here. To put pressure on someone to eat food that they think orients them towards something other than the Lord is to weaken and soon fatally snap their allegiance to Christ. As they habitually turn away from Christ in their meal-taking, their loyalty to Christ will eventually collapse.[11] Paul shows an extraordinary ability here to enter into the consciousness of those who see things quite differently from himself, and makes a remarkable allowance for the different ways in which people of different cultures and backgrounds negotiate their orientation to Christ.[12] What matters to him first and foremost is not judging

[9] See P.D. Gooch, *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8-10 in its Context* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993).

[10] For the notion of a life-hermeneutic, see J.M.G. Barclay, 'Ordinary but Different: Colossians and Hidden Moral Identity', *Australian Biblical Review* 49 (2001) 34-52.

[11] It is clear from Paul's talk of 'destroying' weak believers (1 Cor 8.11) that much more is at stake here than simply causing 'offense'.

[12] For a fine discussion, see W.A. Meeks, 'The Polyphonic Ethic of the Apostle Paul' in his *In Search of the Early Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 196-209.

whose consciousness of things is right or wrong in regard to any particular meal context, but the responsibility of every Christian to care for their brothers and sisters, and to consider the impact their eating might have upon them. As Paul puts it here – highlighting meat as the main presenting issue – 'if food is the cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall' (1 Cor 8.13).

Note that Paul's rule here is pragmatic, contextual and specific in application: he is not banning all meat-consumption for all Christians for all time, but asking them to consider what *in their context* does or does not harm other people. The 'harm' is, in this context, the destruction of their faith-commitment to Christ, but since the overall principle is love (1 Cor 8.1; cf. 13.1-13), we may take him to be equally opposed to practices that violate the demands of neighbour-love.[13] A similar pragmatism and specificity has instituted other forms of abstention in Christian history, driven by the same concerns. I live in the north-east of England, an area once dominated by mining and other manual industries and where, in the 19th century, alcoholism destroyed countless working-class families. Many Christians knew about this issue, but it took the brilliance and courage of Methodism, the denomination most in touch with the working-classes, to advocate radical action. 'If alcohol is the cause of my brother's falling, I will never touch a drop', they argued. In Beamish Open Air Museum and elsewhere one can still see proudly displayed in miners' homes declarations of the pledge of temperance, pledges that, combined with church-based education, lifted thousands of families out of desperate poverty. The alcohol-abstention was local, specific and situational, not necessarily of value in other contexts. But the principle it embodies presses upon us in every context: are the liberties which we enjoy and to which we are entitled subtly destructive of others? And do we care enough to find out?

Here then is a second principle to put alongside our first, in relation to Christian food culture. The first was that all food consumption must be done in orientation and in thanksgiving to God; the second, that any food consumption must take into account the effects of that eating on others. Sometimes people can be 'destroyed' by what we eat, even if the consumption seems harmless enough to us. The two principles merge into one another, since orientation to the God who gave himself in love in Christ can hardly be separated from love for others, for whom Christ died. In fact the two merge quite explicitly when Paul discusses the Lord's Supper, the meal that encapsulates what every other meal should be. This is the meal that is most explicitly oriented to the Lord (it is *the Lord's* supper) and is characterised most obviously by thanksgiving (we call it, after all, *the* eucharist). But Paul is furious that at precisely this meal the wealthier members of the church humiliate those who have nothing: 'each goes ahead with his own meal, so one is hungry while another is drunk' (1 Cor 11.21).[14] It is at this meal that Christians are required to enact what should be true of all meals: uncompromised orientation to the Lord, and unwavering attention to others, especially the weak, the vulnerable and the hungry. And the ethic of the Lord's Supper should be the ethic of every Christian meal.

Food and the Burden of the Weak

There is one other context in which Paul discusses food issues in a similarly nuanced way, and where he puts to work the same two principles that we have just identified in relation to food offered to idols. But interestingly, in this case, the topic is not just the context and orientation of food consumption, but the foodstuffs themselves, and even more interestingly, Paul makes space here for the practice of certain food taboos. The passage I have in mind is Romans 14-15, where Paul discusses communal meals at which some believe that they may eat anything, while others ('the weak') eat only vegetables. Research on this passage and its historical context indicates that the issue is not vegetarianism as such (though that did exist in antiquity), but the practical effects of the observance or non-observance of Jewish food-laws at multi-ethnic (we would say, multi-cultural) Christian meals.[15] The fact that Paul talks about

[13] For an excellent analysis of Paul's ethics here see D.G. Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics* (London: T & T Clark, 2005) 166-203.

[14] For analysis see G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (ed. and transl. by J.H. Schütz; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982) 145-74; D.G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 150-57.

[15] See J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Waco: Word Books, 1988) 799-802; J.M.G. Barclay, '"Do we Undermine the Law?" A Study of Romans 14.1-15.6', in J.D.G. Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul

'clean' and 'unclean' food in this context shows that the Mosaic laws are at stake, and it was not uncommon for Jews, when having to eat in Gentile contexts, to decline to eat all meat and to make do on a vegetarian diet; Daniel did just that while living in the Babylonian court (Dan 1.12). Thus we have some Christians in the Roman congregations following Jewish/Mosaic customs and some not, and when they came together for meals, especially in non-kosher homes, the law-observant believers were strongly critical of those who ate what seemed to them evidently unclean meat, while the non-law-observant believers despised their scrupulous brothers and sisters, no doubt considering their scruples a sign of superstition or intellectual weakness (Rom 14.1-12).

Paul takes a very interesting position on this deeply divisive issue. On the one hand he states very boldly that 'I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself' (Rom 14.14). That categorically overrides the Levitical food laws, and appears to rule out of court any Christian food-taboos. Indeed, a few verses later he insists that 'the Kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14.17). On the other hand, he acknowledges and respects the fact that other genuine believers are persuaded quite differently: some food *is* unclean for someone who thinks it so (Rom 14.14). The context makes clear that this is not tolerance of *any and every* difference of opinion, but that recognition must be given to differing, even opposite, practices, so long as both are genuinely performed in honour of the Lord. As Paul puts it, 'He who eats [for instance, eats pork], eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains [for instance, from that same pork], abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God' (14.6). We may note the same principle of *orientation* that we found operative in the Corinthian discussion: what matters for Paul is whether you can and do direct your eating, *or* your non-eating, in honour and thanksgiving to God. The only difference is that in this case, the question reaches all the way down to the foodstuffs themselves. And it is because he allows for genuine Christ-honouring practice of both kinds that Paul insists that 'the strong' must not pressurize 'the weak' into behaviour that undermines their own allegiance to Christ. Again we note that priority is given to the weak and the vulnerable and that Paul requires from the strong a burden-bearing commitment which he explicitly traces back to Christ: 'let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up: for Christ did not please himself' (15.2-3).

What Paul envisages here is a single Christian community containing diversity of cultural practice, with acute sensitivity to those who have most to lose by being required to follow a universalised norm. It is sometimes said that Christianity fosters a kind of universalism that enforces uniformity, that just because it crosses ethnic boundaries it also undermines the integrity of different cultures, creating a kind of generalised cultural sameness, or at least making any remaining differences of negligible account.[16] But I think this passage, on the central cultural issue of food, speaks otherwise. Paul envisages that a common allegiance to Christ can allow, even foster, strong differences in practice. If the Christian community erases ethnic *boundaries*, it does not erase every ethnic and cultural *line*; indeed it values difference as mutually constructive and enriching, and it raises very sharp questions about who has most to lose when cultural traditions are overridden. To transfer these principles from the Christian community, bound together by common allegiance to Christ, to the wider political context, where common allegiance is always already coloured by some cultural tradition, is no easy task, but I believe there are resources here worth careful attention.

For now, however, our subject is food, and we have been led by this analysis of Paul to the following four conclusions:

1. Although Christian faith imposes no universal or *a priori* rule regarding which foods may or may not be eaten, food is not a non-issue for Christians, but is liable to raise a number of acute and serious questions concerning Christian obedience.
2. A critical question concerning food is whether it can be eaten in thanksgiving to God, whether its orientation is 'to the Lord'. Food consumption is not a neutral issue for Christians, nor an 'unspiritual' matter beneath their moral radar, but as much a part of their Christ-orientation as every other dimension of life.

Siebeck]), 1996) 287-308. For an alternative view see M. Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak. Romans 14.1-15.13 in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[16] See, e.g., D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

3. It is central to Christian discipleship to consider the effects of one's practice on others, to look beyond one's own legitimate rights and freedoms to see how others are affected. Even food – what we eat, and how and where we eat it – can have serious knock-on effects on others, unintended, perhaps, and unexpected; but it our responsibility to know those effects and to weigh them.
4. Food-taboos are not in principle un-Christian; abstention may be a necessary way of honouring the Lord. In particular, if food consumption causes harm to others, if it damages the weak or humiliates the poor, it is Christians' responsibility to impose upon themselves a contextually relevant food taboo. Whatever we do, we must not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God (Rom 14.20).

The Environmental Crisis: Time for a Christian Food Taboo

Christian tradition has long harboured a suspicion of luxury in relation to food consumption, and the annual observance of Lent has been for many a regular reminder of the need for self-discipline in this regard.[17] More recently, with increasing awareness of gross global inequalities in wealth, Western Christians have rightly had their consciences pricked concerning what it means to be 'rich Christians in an age of hunger'.[18] In recent decades the Fair Trade movement has rightly spread from the Christian community into common consciousness, raising questions of trade justice to the top of the agenda when Western consumers enjoy absurdly cheap prices for the products of farmers and artisans in the developing world. We are all aware that, as the world population grows, pressure on land, water and food will become an increasingly significant issue, in which questions of justice and equity will be critical to our global future.

But the issue I want to highlight here concerns climate change, and the contribution of meat-eating to the potentially cataclysmic process of global warming. We do not need to be reminded of the seriousness of the climate change threat: if world temperatures rise by more than 2^0 Celsius, we will enter an irreversible descent into climactic change and its resulting chaos. What is at stake here is not only the ecological balance of the world, but the lives and livelihoods of billions of people, especially the poorest, whose existence will be threatened or thrown into chaos by desertification, by rising sea levels, by extreme weather events, by floods, forest fires, and failed harvests, by water shortages, by devastated fish-stocks, by over-grazing of increasingly limited arable land, and by forced migration. We face an environmental and resulting social-economic crisis on a scale we have never seen before in recorded history, and the question is: what is our Christian responsibility in the face of all this?[19]

Of the many contributors to global warming, we are just beginning to realise the significance of livestock production – especially the farming of cattle, sheep and pigs. In several recent reports, including one from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, it is estimated that, globally, livestock production contributes as much as 18% of the world's greenhouse gas production – considerably more, in fact, that than contributed by all forms of transport put together (estimated at 13%).[20] There are several ways in which increasingly intensive livestock production harms the planet – in overgrazing and land-degradation, in water consumption and water pollution, in the production of fertilizer, and in the heavy use of arable land for the production of livestock feed (8kg of grain being needed to produce 1kg of beef). But if we focus here on greenhouse gas emissions, the two main factors are clear: first, the deforestation of large tracts of the earth, especially in the Amazon, where 13 million hectares annually are being cleared to provide grazing land for animals or feedcrops such as soya beans – with massive impact on CO_2 emissions, and loss of carbon storage; and secondly, the greenhouse gas emissions caused by the animals themselves, especially ruminants such as sheep and cows. The really damaging things here are the methane caused by the

[17] On trends in early Christian food-asceticism, regarding meat and wine – the latter extending even to the eucharist – see A. McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

[18] R.J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: A Biblical Study* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987).

[19] My focus here is on the impact of global change on humanity. For an assessment of Pauline resources relevant to care of the environment more generally, see D.G. Horrell, C. Hunt and C. Southgate, *The Green Paul: Rereading the Apostle in an Age of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, forthcoming).

[20] UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options* (available at www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.htm)

belching and flatulence of cows and sheep (especially their belching), and the nitrous oxide produced by their manure. Methane is 23 times more dangerous than CO_2 in its global warming effects, and in the UK, at least, ruminant animals are responsible for 37% of human-induced methane emissions. Nitrous oxide is 296 times more damaging than CO_2, and animal manure accounts, in the UK, for 67% of the human-induced emissions of the substance.[21] One could add here the emission of ammonia, which contributes significantly to the acidification of the atmosphere. If we translate this into carbon footprint and focus here on beef (which has twice the carbon footprint of pigs or poultry), the consumption of 1 kg of beef is the greenhouse gas equivalent of a 100km flight for each passenger, or the greenhouse gas equivalent of the use of a car for a 250km journey. To put that in other terms, to halve our consumption of red meat would do more for the environment than halving our use of the car.

With rising levels of wealth in the developing world, especially Asia and India, there is rapidly rising demand for meat and dairy produce, and it is predicted that meat consumption will at least double by 2050, with calamitous rises in the production of greenhouse gases. By the same date, 2050, the world needs to *reduce* its greenhouse gases by 80% to prevent disastrous decline into climate chaos. There is frantic research being conducted at the moment into whether livestock production can be made less ruinous for the world – whether the diet of ruminants can be altered, or their stomachs genetically modified to produce less methane, or whether their manure can be used effectively for biogas production of electricity – but unless and until something dramatically changes in this respect, it seems to me the answer is compellingly clear. We need to reduce livestock production, by reducing demand: in short, we need to eat less meat. As many commentators are currently noting, on top of our concerns about fair trade, food miles and food packaging, the next big food issue is clear and urgent: we need to reduce our consumption of meat. While Sir Paul McCartney has raised this issue to national consciousness with his call for 'Meat-Free Mondays', an urgent crisis-warning about meat consumption has been issued by Sir Nicholas Stern (author of the Stern Report) and Dr. Rajendra Pachauri (Chair of the International Panel on Climate Change).

This does not necessarily equate to a complete ban on meat-eating – although some may choose vegetarianism as the best option in this context – but it is time for rich Christians to take the lead in practising a *major* reduction in meat consumption, and in calling others to follow suit.[22] Of course there are partial precedents for this in the Christian tradition – the Catholic tradition of fish on Fridays, and the Orthodox abstention from meat during Lent – but this call for a partial food-taboo is clearly more extensive and more demanding. But it issues from the very same principles unearthed in our analysis of the Pauline passages on food. We are required to ask ourselves, 'Can we eat this food – or continue this pattern of food consumption – in honour of the Lord and in thanksgiving to him?' Can we do so knowing the damage this is doing to the world he created and for which he gave himself in Christ? We are also required to ask, 'What are the effects of my eating on others, and what damage might I be doing to them, even unintentionally so?' And here the more we know about the effects of livestock production on climate change, and the more we know about the devastating effects of climate change on the world population, especially on the poorest and most vulnerable, the more this question should haunt our meal tables.

In fact, in our new context, several of Paul's statements on food take on a wholly new light. He told the Romans, you will remember, that 'the Kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14.17). In our current crisis we need to turn that around. *Because* the Kingdom of God is about righteousness, in the sense of justice, and *because* the Kingdom of God is about peace and joy, we *have to be* concerned with matters of food and drink, where they precisely create the

[21] For a UK-based report, see T. Garnett, *Cooking up a Storm: Food, Greenhouse Gas Emissions and our Changing Climate* (University of Surrey: Centre for Environmental Strategy; Food Climate Research Network, 2008). www.fcrn.org.uk/fcrnPubs/publications/PDFs/CuaS_Summary_web.pdf

[22] As was pointed out after the Regent College lecture (see note 1), in some developing countries the livestock sector is a central part of the economy (supporting about 1 billion farmers) and a collapse in global meat consumption could damage the livelihoods of the poor. There is clearly a dilemma if the poor are equally damaged either way, but the reduction in meat consumption I am calling for is designed to prevent a catastrophic *increase* in meat production, not end it altogether. Given the rising world population and a rising nutritional demand for meat and dairy products in the developing world, the rest of us would need to *drastically* reduce our consumption even to keep greenhouse gas emissions at their current level – let alone reduce them, as is necessary for the future of the planet.

conditions of global injustice, conflict and misery. As we have seen, the contextual flexibility with which Paul applies his own principles in relation to food would not make him at all worried if, in our new global environmental crisis, we turn around or reapply his principle in such a way. In both food passages we studied, Paul's concern for the welfare of others was paramount: his concern lest eating cause the damage and even destruction of others can certainly be expanded from its original context (of damage to conscience and Christ-allegiance) to damage in a direct, physical sense. Our consumption of meat could literally cause the death of others, and it is impossible to square this with the Christian duty of love towards all those for whom Christ died. Indeed, Paul's only direct statement on meat now takes on a wholly new meaning: 'if food is the cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall' (1 Cor 8.13).

To conclude: while food taboos have never been a general or universal feature of Christian identity or Christian culture, issues concerning food consumption and meal-taking have been formative in the definition of Christian identity from the very beginning. And as long as we continue to celebrate 'the Lord's Supper', with its paradigmatic concern for orientation to the Lord and for attention to the needs of the poor, meals and food will continue to remain at the heart of Christian self-understanding. Paul's ethic is both highly principled and highly contextual, and he allows for the exercise of specific food taboos if they are necessary means for the Christians' orientation to God and for their attention to the welfare of the weak. In our present context, we need to face up to a very particular crisis which has a direct bearing on our patterns of food consumption. It is now our Christian duty to reduce our meat consumption to an absolute minimum, if not zero, and we should have no hesitation in urging this self-denial on ourselves and on others, for the sake of the future of our planet and the lives of its most vulnerable inhabitants. Food should thus become, in at least this respect, a marker of Christian identity; anything less and we will fail in our obligation to embody and express God's embrace of the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

GOD ALIVE IN THE VOICE OF PAUL

Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Living Paul: An Introduction to the Apostle and his Thought* (London: SPCK, 2009. £12.99. pp. 192. ISBN: 978-0-281-06110-5).

It is always a pleasure when a great scholar takes up the pen to write an introductory book in the area of his or her expertise. Thiselton's *Living Paul* should certainly be ranked among the classics in this genre within Pauline studies. The author's extensive experience as a hermeneutician is evident on every page of the book; although the title does not give it away, this is a strongly theological exposition of the apostle's teaching. It is also an excellent example of how great learning can serve to lighten the burden of perplexing debates for the beginner, rather than to add to his or her bewilderment.

Thiselton keeps constantly in view the questions that have been significant in the history of theology in the West, without losing sight of issues that have special significance for the laity of today. Thus we find discussions both of patripassianism and of Paul's attitude to women; of justification by faith alone and of postmodernity. Complex issues are deftly situated in the history of the debate and then discussed with close reference to the text, often with special attention to relevant nuances of Greek and Hebrew.

The book takes us on an exhilarating journey, moving from the reasons why people today may find Paul an awkward character, to a whistle-stop tour of his history, teaching on the three persons of the Trinity, on humanity and the work of Christ, on the church and the last things, and concluding with postmodernity. Throughout it is written with warmth and humanity; we are reminded of the apostle's humour and warned not to be too dry about his ascription of creedal titles to Jesus. A brilliant résumé of the contribution of postmodernism and postmodernity (and of the distinction between them) closes with the reminder that the message is to turn from idols to the living God, and promises that 'the "wisdom" of the cross will outlive postmodernism in all its forms, and Paul's voice will continue to live.'

This is an excellent introduction, showing the combination of faith and learning, wit and wisdom, detail and grand synthesis at its best.

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