

## GUIDES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

*This guide (and others in the series) is an initiative of the Office of the Bishop and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. It is intended to help church members consider how they might respond to contemporary ethical issues. It is meant for use in personal reflection and is not an 'official' statement of the church on the topic. I am grateful to Nick Schwarz, Assistant to the Bishop – Public Theology, for his ongoing work on this project.*

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# ETHICAL EATING

## **Can choices I make about what, when, where and how I eat involve moral or ethical considerations?**

### ***Learn about the ethics of food and eating***

Concern with 'right eating' or 'mindful eating' is a feature of the contemporary mindful living movement, which caters to people's desire to lead an ethical life. Among the various groups vying to convert us to their way of thinking about ethical food choices are advocates of vegetarianism and veganism, organic foods, fair trade foods and 'slow' foods. Typically, when people talk about 'eating ethically', they mean trying to increase the proportion of foods we eat that meet high standards in one or more of the following areas:

- Animal welfare: where humans eat animals or animal products, the animals are well treated and if they are killed, it is done humanely.
- Environmental impact: food is produced, processed, packaged and transported in environmentally benign and sustainable ways.
- Social justice: the people involved in food production, marketing and consumption are dealt with honestly and fairly.

But many people also consider the following questions relevant to the topic of ethical eating:

- Has the food been received with thanks, or is it taken for granted?
- Have good manners been used in the receiving and eating of the food?
- Has the food been distributed fairly?
- Has the food been needlessly wasted?
- Is the cost of expensive food justified?
- Is so much of the food being consumed that it poses a health risk?

Some people become so concerned about the ethical status, purity or healthiness of food that they refuse to eat food that doesn't meet their exacting standards. If they express moral disapproval of friends and acquaintances whose standards are not so exacting, they risk losing friends and becoming socially isolated. If a person's concern with dietary purity becomes obsessive and is associated with anxiety, they might be diagnosed with a form of mental illness labelled orthorexia, which comes from the Greek words *ortho*, meaning 'correct' and *orexis*, meaning 'appetite'.

An important question to consider is to what extent is 'ethical eating' a concern of wealthy, privileged people who are 'spoilt for choice' and have little or no experience of food insecurity?

### **Consider the ethics of food and eating from a Christian ethical perspective**

Are there ways of choosing food and eating that are more pleasing to God than others?

Christians look first to God's word in the Bible for guidance on ethical issues. But because the Bible is not a textbook on ethics related to food production, marketing and consumption, and because some contemporary ethical concerns about food (such as particular food products' 'ecological footprint' or 'embodied cruelty or slavery') were unknown in biblical times or are not comprehensively addressed in the Scriptures, we cannot find in the Bible clear and direct answers to all our questions.

So, even if the Bible doesn't give clear and direct answers to all our questions, what are some lessons we can learn from it?

- God gave humans the task of taking care of his creation. God freed us to use his creation to increase our living standards and quality of life. But some ways of using it to enhance our lives are better, morally speaking, than others.
- Christian teaching on the fall and sin tells us the world is 'broken'. One way the world's brokenness reveals itself is that human efforts to do good also often cause harm of some sort. For example, our efforts to increase food production (a good thing) have caused harm to animals, the environment, and in some instances, other people in the process. The harm may be unrecognised and/or unintended or recognised but defended as a 'reasonable or necessary price to pay'.
- God cares for people. He wants us to care for them too. We can be sure that God wants food to be produced and marketed and consumed in ways that benefit everyone involved. It cannot be pleasing to God when food is produced, marketed and consumed in ways that exploit, deceive, or otherwise harm people.
- God cares for animals. He does not prohibit the consumption of animal products like meat, eggs and dairy foods (Genesis 9:1–3). Jesus himself ate meat and fish. But we can be confident that God would prefer us to treat farmed animals respectfully rather than abusively.
- God cares for the earth. He does not prohibit using chemical fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides and insist on organic or regenerative or biodynamic farming, but we can be confident that he would like us – as best we can – to farm in ways that don't carelessly degrade and/or deplete soil, contaminate water, and needlessly kill harmless species. We can be confident that God favours research into environmentally friendly and affordable farming methods and reliably deliver good yields.
- God says nothing directly to us in the Bible about foods containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs). But we can be confident that God would like humans to recognise the hazards of wielding this power to modify plant and animal genomes and use it wisely and cautiously if we decide to use them.

In the Old Testament, the law God gave to Moses declared some foods (for example, pork and shellfish) to be 'unclean' and off limits for the people of Israel (see Leviticus 11 and 17). In Jesus' day, the Pharisees had also developed elaborate washing rituals before eating that they said were necessary to keep themselves clean or pure in God's eyes. The following texts show, however, that those rules no longer apply:

- Jesus said, 'What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them' (Matthew 15:11; Mark 7:18,19).
- Peter's vision on the roof of the house in Joppa of food animals being lowered on a sheet from heaven suggests not only that God is happy for his people to associate in good conscience with non-Jews but to eat meat, even meat of animals previously regarded as 'unclean' (Acts 10:9–32; Acts 11:5–14).
- Jesus and his disciples did not adhere to the Pharisees' rules for maintaining spiritual purity, such as rules about ritual washing before eating and picking food to eat on the Sabbath.

Romans 14:2–6 underscores the importance of Christian freedom and the rule of individual conscience:

One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Some Christians may be concerned about whether it is right to eat foods certified as kosher or halal, ie foods that meet the requirements of Jewish and Islamic law, respectively. If you are worried about this, you might look for guidance in Paul's advice to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 8 about eating meat sacrificed to idols. In pointing to this passage, we emphasise that most Christians do *not* believe that Jews and Muslims worship an idol! Rather, they consider Jews and Muslims to have an incomplete, and thus distorted, view of the one true God.

### **Further questions to think about**

Which of the Christian virtues ought to shape our attitudes to food and eating?

- For example, gratitude, self-control, a sense of fairness, love and respect for God's non-human creation, and love for our human neighbours.

What is motivating my desire to 'eat ethically'?

- The desire to do a good thing can easily drift into self-righteous pride, a sense of superiority and judgemental or contemptuous attitudes towards others who don't measure up to our standards. Are we motivated primarily by a quiet determination to make a difference or a desire to draw attention to ourselves through public shows of virtue? Jesus said, 'Beware of practising your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven' (Matthew 6:1).
- Am I focusing on ethical eating:
  - so that others may see and admire my virtue?
  - to increase my sense of control in a life full of uncertainties?
  - to distract attention (my own and others) from other aspects of my life that I am not living in accordance with Christian ethics, for example, in my sexual behaviour?

### **Decide where you stand and act accordingly**

Consider how rigid or flexible you might be as you decide where you stand in relation to choices about what, where, when and how to eat. Will you leave room for varying your position in different circumstances? Will you expect others to cater to your dietary preferences even if it means spending more money on special foods and devoting extra time to preparing separate meals for you?<sup>1</sup> What attitude will you take towards people who do not – or cannot afford to – follow the same approach to food as you?

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<sup>1</sup> Note we are talking about *preferences*, not *requirements*. A friend catering for you is more likely to do so without hard feelings if you have compelling medical or religious reasons for excluding or including particular foods than if you don't.

Recognise that there are several different approaches to food and eating that could be considered 'ethical'. Yours may not be the only approach that is defensible!

One thing Christians can readily agree on is the goodness of thanking God for food. Let us not take it for granted.

### **Review your ethical eating position periodically**

You will inevitably find yourself in – or hear about others who have found themselves in – situations that have challenged beliefs about ethical eating. Such times are good times to reflect on and reassess what you believe. Perhaps you will decide to moderate or relax your position. On the other hand, your conscience might induce you to adopt a more restrictive position.

### **Further reading and viewing**

*Thoughtful eating: food, relationships and the environment from a biblical perspective*, Jubilee Centre 2019, executive summary available at <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/thoughtful-eating/>

Andrew Phillips, 24 May 2019, 'Let nothing be wasted!': learning from Jesus' food ethics, Jubilee Centre, <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/nothing-wasted-jesus-food-ethics/>

Justin Brierley interviews church leaders Greg Boyd (vegetarian transitioning to vegan) and Joshua D Jones (who loves his meat) on his show Unbelievable? 'The Vegan Debate: Should Christians eat meat?', 18 September 2021.