



# Thinking Theologically About Food

In our modern consumer-orientated world, food has become little more than a commodity that we mindlessly consume. We fail to perceive the mystery of food. Here are some theological insights to help us receive food as a precious gift and sign of God's sustaining care.



## Norman Wirzba

Norman Wirzba is Research Professor of Theology, Ecology, and Rural Life at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. His most recent book is *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Why is it that the most basic things in life are often also the most taken for granted? For many people the worry and pace of day to day life make it likely that they will either forget or ignore the people and the places and the activities that give them meaning and joy. Owing to the demands of a full schedule and heavy work load, children are not given the attention they need and deserve, exercise and physical fitness get shifted (again) to next week, or the care of our homes and neighbourhoods is put off to another day. Being either too busy or too tired, some days we wake up and feel that the world is a whirl and life is passing us by.

Food is one of those basic realities that easily gets lost in this frantic shuffle. For many of us food has become a commodity, something we mindlessly consume on our way to doing other matters. It is little more than fuel for the body. What matters most, in this context, is that we get it as cheaply as possible and with the minimum amount of fuss. Who has time to devote much attention to food – where it comes from, how it was produced, whether it is healthy or not – let alone develop the patience and skill to grow food ourselves? It may be true that in years past many more people were involved in agricultural ways of life. But is it not an unqualified boon that most people are now relieved of agricultural work, what Karl Marx once called 'the idiocy of rural life'? Whether idiocy or not, one of the key benefits of an agricultural sensibility is that it teaches that food is a complex, vulnerable, blessed and sometimes terrifying reality, and that eating is our indispensable participation in the ways of life *and* death.

It is important to appreciate that when food is understood as a commodity, or when food is reduced to being

material fuel to keep our machine-like bodies on the move, a destructive logic is let loose upon the world. Why? Because commodity ways of thinking are focused on the goals of maximum efficiency, productivity and profitability. Admittedly, there is a lot that is attractive about a commodity approach, not the least of which is the fact that industrial methods of food production create lots of calories at a relatively inexpensive consumer price. The downside, however, is that to achieve these goals the fertility of soils, the care of animals and the health of eaters are regularly compromised. The massive amounts of wheat products that now sweeten and flavour our foods depend on monoculture farms that rely on the heavy application of synthetic, fossil-fuel derived fertilisers and ever-more toxic herbicides. Cheap meat depends on factory methods that abuse chickens, turkeys, cattle and pigs, and deprive animal workers of a humane workplace and a just wage. And attractively packaged convenience foods depend on processing techniques that leech out nutrition and add preservatives and flavourings known to injure human health.

Does theology have anything to say about this? I think so. And the best place to start is to note that from a Christian point of view it is a desecration to describe food as a commodity. If we turn to creation narratives in Scripture, one of the most basic things to see is that food is God's way of providing for the life of the world. Every creature that lives has to eat. Indeed, as the Cambridge Dean Ralph Inge once put it, 'All of nature is a conjugation of the verb "to eat," in the active and the passive.' Food is thus the fully sensory manifestation of God's daily provision. Put most succinctly, *food is God's love made delectable*.

Consider the scene in the Garden of Eden. God is a Gardener with knees on the ground, holding the soil so close as to breathe into it the warm life that becomes

## food is a complex, vulnerable, blessed and sometimes terrifying reality

the first human being. But not only humans. Through the same soil God creates the life of plants and animals. Life is a witness to God's nearness and tender regard. Growth and nutrition communicate God's intimacy at the core of life's most basic movements, not the least of these being the movement of eating. So when Genesis says, 'God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food', (2.9) we are being instructed to notice that God is present to every beating heart and every digesting/nourishing stomach that keeps life on the move. When creatures are well fed and properly nourished, it is the occasion for God's delight in a world wonderfully and beautifully made. No wonder, then, that the first creation story in Genesis 1 — 2 finds its climax in God's Sabbath rest: God's creativity comes to rest in the joy that communicates there is no other place one could possibly want to be.

The vision that is communicated here is not confined to the Genesis narrative. The psalmist too can't get enough of the splendour and fecundity of God's created world. God is the great and majestic One who makes springs gush forth in valleys that then give drink to every wild animal:

'From your lofty abode you water the mountains;  
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.  
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants  
for people to use,  
to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to  
gladden the human heart,  
oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen  
the human heart.' (104.13–15)

God is constantly present to the world as the source of its nourishment and life. This is why all life must continually look back to God. Without God there is no food, no drink, and no breath:

'These all look to you to give them their food in due  
season;  
when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good  
things.  
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die and return  
to their dust.  
When you send forth your spirit/breath, they are  
created;  
and you renew the face of the ground.' (104.27–30)

Reading this passage it is clear that God is glorified in the nourishment of creatures. The presence of good food — which necessarily presupposes the fertility of soils, the freshness of waters, the vitality of plant life, the health

and contentment of animals, and a just agricultural economy — is the daily, mundane and mysterious witness to God's love active in our world.

The love of God, however, does not come cheap. To see how this is so, begin with the recognition that for any creature to eat, other creatures must die. Even if we commit to a vegetarian or vegan diet, the processes of fertility and fecundity depend on life and death dramas that begin deep within soil and extend to the mastication of the flesh of the world. Soil, through the billions of microorganisms it hosts, is the great and terrifying miracle of the world because it constantly receives the dead bodies of the world, and then — by eating them — transforms death into the possibility for new life. Recalling God the Gardener's handling of soil, how can we learn to see God's loving presence even in this dark, subterranean context? Put slightly differently, how do we present ourselves as faithful to and then make ourselves worthy of receiving and eating another's life *and* death?

I don't believe there is a tidy or easy response to this question. It does not seem to me that we have the understanding or the vocabulary to plumb the depths of life *or* death. But we must respond, if only because we must eat. Reading Scripture, I think a way toward a faithful response is to adopt a sacrificial sensibility and way of life. This is difficult, not only because the call to sacrifice has been perverted to degrade and exploit rather than gratefully receive life, but also because a sacrificial response entails the offering of oneself to each other, the world and to God.

When thinking about God's command to the Israelites that they sacrifice from among their healthy animals and their first fruits, our attention quickly focuses on the killing of the animal and the burning of flesh and fruit. The real focus, however, should be elsewhere. It should be on the labour, skill, devotion and affection of the farmer or shepherd who brought the offering to the altar as a humble expression of gratitude for gifts that exceed all comprehension. To be a farmer is to know that without the life and death of others, human livelihood is impossible. It is also to know that though we can do much to promote the blessings of livelihood — work hard, be attentive, develop appropriate skills, be neighbourly — the foundations of livelihood are forever beyond our grasp and control. As the Kentucky farmer and poet Wendell Berry once put it in a Sabbath poem, 'Harvest will fill the barn; for that / The hand must ache, the face must sweat. / And yet no leaf or grain is filled / By work of ours; the field is tilled / And left to grace. That we may reap, / Great work is done while we're asleep.'

A sacrificial sensibility is born out of a felt need to give oneself as a nurturing gift to others in response to the inexplicable gift that others are to us. At the heart of every visible offering there is the more fundamental self-offering. If a person comes to an altar without a commitment to give him- or herself to others — a distinct possibility not lost on the biblical prophets who denounced the unjust and cold hearts of people at the temple — the sacrificial display is a sham. It is a violation of God's own self-offering with the world. For us to

live at all we must receive the gifts of the lives of other creatures. To live faithfully we must respond with hearts and hands that are devoted to the health, well-being and happiness of those we depend upon. To enter a sacrificial sensibility is to commit to the learning of the attention, patience and skills necessary for the nurture and care of the world.

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in God's own life made flesh and food in the person Jesus Christ. John's Gospel makes the point most graphically when Jesus announces that he is the 'bread of life' (Jn 6.35ff.). His is no ordinary bread. Unlike the tasty grain made flour that is then transformed by yeast and water and salt and heat, Jesus does not dissolve or disappear within us through processes of digestion. Instead, Jesus enters our life so as to transform us from within as an abiding, nurturing presence equipping us to live the ministering life that he makes possible. 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them' (6.56). When Christians come to the Lord's Table, when they participate in the thanksgiving meal we call Eucharist, they commit to offer themselves to the world in acts of care, feeding, healing, exorcism and reconciliation. In short, they extend and make visible a sacrificial understanding of life, which is to say practical forms of action that nurture others and give glory to God.

The Old Testament view that God creates out of love – indeed, the idea that creatures are God's love made visible, fragrant, tactile, audible and delectable – finds its parallel New Testament expression in the view that Christ is the one *in* whom, *through* whom and *for* whom all things on heaven and on earth are created. As the Christ hymn in Colossians puts it, in Jesus 'all things hold together' (1.17). The love and life that God breathes into soil is the same love made flesh in Jesus, the same love that circulates through all the bodies of creation. How can this be so, and why would it matter for Christians to think this way?

One way to answer this question is to examine it through the lens of eating. As today's industrial food system makes plain, it is possible to produce and consume food in ways that degrade and alienate creatures. Whether by eating alone and in fear or by eating food that abuses the life and death within it, we can witness all sorts of ways in which the nurturing presence of God in the world is denied. But eating does not need to be this way. When inspired and fed by the 'bread of life', we have a daily invitation to grow food in ways that honour creatures and the Creator, and then eat in ways that promote fellowship and Sabbath joy. To do this we need Christ's reconciling presence within us, a presence that heals wounds, feeds hungers, forgives wrongs, welcomes strangers and searches for the lost. Jesus shows us that there is no abundant life apart from our membership together. He also instructs us that in God's Kingdom, no creature is so insignificant as to be unworthy of care.

When I think about what this reconciling, God-honouring way of life looks like, I remember my grandfather Wilhelm Roepke. A farmer who began his life in Germany but then moved to western Canada after World

War II, his was a life devoted to the care of his fields and animals. Though he lived in the shadow and splendour of the Canadian Rockies, his desire was for his farm and for the community of creatures and people he shared it with. Happy and contented animals, productive fields,

## food is the fully sensory manifestation of God's daily provision

well-fed family and guests at his table – these were the marks by which he judged his life.

It was by no means an easy life. The demands of care required steady commitment, affectionate attention, honed skill and a complex, humble intelligence that recognised opportunity but also admitted personal impotence and ignorance. With no other person have I seen so much in evidence an appreciation for the world as God's gift to us to nurture and celebrate. I think it is fair to say that he understood Psalm 65 with an uncommon depth because he so much wanted to join in God's farming ways with the world and sing with the whole of creation.

But I also know that his is a world that has mostly vanished. Can we, living mostly as urbanites or suburbanites, share in and extend God's love for the world through the eating that we do? I believe there are grounds for hope provided we are prepared to be 'joined with all the living' (Ecc 9.4). I believe there is hope for the feeding and healing of the world if as Christians we commit to receiving our food as God's love made delectable. No doubt, this will require a significant transformation in how we grow, receive, share and taste food. For this transformation to occur we will need to give up the ignorance and passivity that saturate so much of our consumer relationships to food. But this is good news because it has the potential to take us into gardens (as we learn to grow some food) and onto farms (so we can appreciate the need for strong agricultural economies). It has the potential to inspire us to turn church grounds into community gardens that nurture neighbourhoods as well as individual bodies. It may even lead us to rethink the whole of our life as an extended effort to witness to and participate in God's primordial, ever-constant and creative hospitable ways with the world.



## Christians Aware Summer School

### A Free Lunch?

### Grass Roots Food Security

15<sup>th</sup> to 20th July 2013

at Parcevall Hall, Appletreewick, Skipton, North Yorks BD23 6DG

For further details contact visit [www.christiansaware.co.uk](http://www.christiansaware.co.uk) or email [barbarabutler@christiansaware.co.uk](mailto:barbarabutler@christiansaware.co.uk); tel: 01162540770