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# Knowing the Standard American Diet by Its Fruits: Is Unrestrained Omnivorism Spiritually Beneficial?

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**Abstract**

This essay aims to challenge the standard [North] American diet's (SAD) default status in church and among North American Christians generally. It attempts to allay some common concerns about the suitability of food ethics as a topic for serious Christian discernment, and argues that SAD is not spiritually beneficial, drawing support from five traditional sources for Christian moral deliberation, including and especially general revelation and discernment of the fruits of the spirit.

**Keywords**

Food ethics, Animal ethics, Animals and religion, Environmentalism, Standard American diet, Meat-eating

**Introduction**

Our current food system produces more food in less time at lower short-term cost to middle-class consumers than at any time in history. Even so, a growing body of evidence suggests that the industrial farming methods employed by this system and the dietary choices that drive it are having serious unintended consequences for the created order, consequences that do not typically show up in the price paid at the register. Among these consequences, critics maintain, are marginalization of the world's poor, deterioration of personal and public health, exploitation of animals, degradation of the environment, and increased risk that long-term global food security cannot be sustained. If these criticisms are legitimate, the standard American diet—a diet composed largely of animal products sourced mostly from industrial farms—is degrading creation at all levels: human, animal, and environmental.

As forceful and credible as these lines of criticism have become, the church has been slow to make food ethics a central part of its broader conversation about how to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Mic 6:8) in a world facing 21st-century challenges. Indeed, the status quo

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in North American Christendom is that eating the standard American diet (hereafter SAD) requires no explanation. Not only is this diet generally the default among congregants, but our fellowship halls and church basements are often among the easiest places to indulge and habituate these eating practices at potluck tables brimming with fried chicken, and at lock-ins boasting all-you-can-eat meat-filled pizza. When we factor in the acknowledgment that—at many churches, anyway—hearing a compelling sermon on food ethics is about as likely as finding a stalk of fresh Brussels sprouts at a convenience store, a hard reality hits home: if there is any of God’s truth to be discerned in contemporary criticisms of SAD, the church is not a particularly hospitable place to discover it, much less to find fellowship in living it out.

To be fair, our collective inertia on this issue is understandable. As one of the most primordial human needs, eating is such a habitual and humdrum activity that it readily evades our reflective attention. Furthermore, because eating is also a powerful expression of personal and communal identity, reflecting on our eating habits, when the opportunity does arise, can be a threatening proposition. Not only must we face the unwelcome prospect of subjecting our culinary identities to potentially life-changing scrutiny, but also if we discern that changes are requisite, then we risk estrangement from family and friends and invite the wider perception that we are too idealistic, sentimental, or judgmental of others. And putting aside all such self-interested aversions to reconsidering our diets, a sincere altruist might genuinely wonder whether food ethics should be a priority for the church in a world facing so much brokenness and injustice.

The fact that this dietary inertia is understandable, however, is no excuse for remaining in a place of ignorance and indifference as the evidence piles up that our habits are cutting deeply against the grain of values as central to Christianity as neighbor love, compassion for the powerless, and responsible stewardship. The time has come for an honest church-wide discussion about the ethics of eating.

My aim in this article is to challenge SAD’s default status in church and among North American Christians generally. First, I explain what is at stake in my guiding question: “Is unrestrained omnivorism as typified by SAD spiritually beneficial?” Then, I attempt to allay some common skeptical concerns about the suitability of food ethics as a topic for serious Christian discernment. Second, I develop a *prima facie* case that SAD is *not* spiritually beneficial, drawing on five traditional sources for Christian moral deliberation, including and especially general revelation and discernment of the fruits of the Spirit. I conclude that, in the absence of a rebuttal vindicating SAD, the church should actively encourage Christians to discern and adopt more redemptive eating habits, and Christians who are able should take action toward this end.

## **Taking Food Ethics to Church**

The question of how to begin this discernment process in a way that is accessible and charitable to all interested parties is challenging, given that there are complicated and charged social dynamics in play among the various perspectives on food ethics in any given community. In many cases, the large majority of participants are new to the issue, likely to be consuming SAD, and apprehensive or even defensive about critically examining it. Meanwhile, the small minority of folks who

catalyze the discussion and are most involved in sustaining it often hold strong counter-cultural views expressed perhaps a bit too stridently, and are already eating a greener diet—maybe even a vegetarian or vegan one—consumed perhaps a bit too proudly. Add to these dynamics that people’s inclinations on this issue often track along other potentially divisive fault-lines in the church (urban/rural, affluent/poor, progressive/conservative, male/female, etc.), and the table is set for skepticism and even spiritual concern about those whose views differ on what is for dinner. Little wonder that even our best-intentioned discussions of food ethics easily descend into defensive proof-texting bouts in which the protection of cherished traditions or the advancement of pet causes eclipses honest introspection.

To keep the conversation focused and open-spirited, then, it is important to take careful stock both of what is and what is not at stake for the church-wide discussion of food ethics I envision (or at least for the provisional approach to the early stages of this discussion that I briefly explore here). The guiding question is whether unrestrained omnivorism as typified by SAD is spiritually beneficial. To stave off any confusion about what I intend to be asking here, let me briefly explain what I take “unrestrained omnivorism,” “typified by SAD,” and “spiritually beneficial” to mean in this context.

By “unrestrained omnivorism,” I mean a diet that is characterized by free consumption of animal products such as meat, eggs, and dairy without regard for where they come from, what methods are used to produce them, and what moral and practical problems might attend their production. In the sense of the term I have in mind, an unrestrained omnivore need not be someone who regularly overindulges in animal products or who eats a particularly wide variety of them. The lack of restraint I am concerned with here pertains not to being free of restrictions on the amount or variety of animal products consumed, but rather to being free of restrictions concerning the provenance of these products. Most present-day North Americans—indeed, the vast majority of us—are unrestrained omnivores in this sense. If I can walk into an average American restaurant and find three menu items I can eat without thinking twice, then odds are good that I am an unrestrained omnivore, and that is true whether I order the “healthy” chicken salad or the “hearty” strip steak.

If I am dining out in a typical American restaurant in 2013, moreover, the odds are also good that SAD typifies the unrestrained omnivorism I am exemplifying. On average, I am eating significantly greater quantities of meat, eggs, and dairy than I would be if I lived in most other places in the world. In addition, the vast majority of the animal products I am consuming is sourced by large-scale industrial farms or CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations) where the animals are subjected to intensive confinement and other rigors that are increasingly matters of serious moral and practical concern among scholarly and popular audiences alike. And though CAFOs are often singled-out for criticism, they are just one link in an agribusiness supply chain whose products are the staples of SAD.

These facts are important because they enable us to understand the subject of our concern—unrestrained omnivorism—in relation to historical (21st century) and geographical (North

American) realities in which this approach to eating raises unprecedented moral and practical challenges (more on this in the next section, “Challenging the Standard American Diet”). By indexing our concern to the specific challenges unrestrained omnivorism poses in this particular time and place as SAD, we remind ourselves that the question of whether this practice is spiritually beneficial *for us* is a highly contextual one. As such, it is perfectly sensible that the discernment processes of a 1st-century Palestinian, a 19th-century North American, or a 21st-century Tanzanian would look different from the one that our present circumstances require of us.

What exactly are we asking, then, when we inquire whether unrestrained omnivorism in the standard American mode is “spiritually beneficial”? In the spirit of Saint Paul’s epistolary advice about how to strive for spiritual maturity, let us think of a practice as spiritually beneficial when it is productive of or conducive to ongoing spiritual awakening, growth, or flourishing, where such spiritual advances are understood, at least in part, as matters of acquiring, exemplifying, or multiplying the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness (mercy), and self-control (Gal 5:22). On this interpretation, we can generally expect practices that are spiritually beneficial to increase the fruits of the Spirit in our individual and communal lives, and we can generally expect practices that are not spiritually beneficial to result in stagnation at best, and if we are not very careful, the despoiling of spiritual fruits. More concretely, spiritually beneficial practices will typically push us and the communities and institutions we inhabit toward more joyful, faithful, merciful versions of ourselves; practices that are not spiritually beneficial will threaten either to keep us entrenched in unproductive ruts or to make things worse—to push us deeper into the reaches of indifference, despair, conflict, anxiety, cruelty, stinginess of spirit, inauthenticity, and selfishness.

In summary, the guiding question is whether our dietary habits as citizens of an affluent industrialized country in a globalized 21st-century world are pushing us in the kingdom direction toward more spiritually fruitful lives and institutions, or causing us to stagnate, or worse, to abet forces of degradation and injustice that are undoing creation. This question is a threatening one. And because threatening questions tend to summon skeptical responses that can stymie productive discernment, it is important to flag some of those worries and to explain why they need not derail the conversation.

The first thing to note is that the outcome of the proposed discussion is not directly relevant to questions concerning anyone’s salvation or “justification,” nor will it entail some stringent “new asceticism” that separates the sheep from the goats on the basis of diet. By contrast, the definition of “spiritually beneficial” at stake here places these dietary concerns squarely on the sanctification trajectory. In saying that Christians ought to take this question seriously, I am not claiming that their eternal lives depend on it, or that they should be held at arm’s length for failing to consider it. The point, rather, is that Christians seeking to reap the reward of spiritual maturity—a goal toward which Paul enjoins us all to strive—ought to see food ethics as an important part of the journey into more consistent enactment of Christian virtues such as neighbor love, faithfulness, compassion, good stewardship, and the like. The hope is to invite Christians who are already invested in kingdom pursuits to see the question of what to eat as deeply resonant with their ongoing efforts.

A second common concern is that discussing food ethics entails complicity with various “agendas” popularly assumed to be at ideological odds with Christianity. One might claim that interest in this topic is symptomatic of political correctness, or a front for animal rights “extremism,” or evidence of an imposition of affluent values on other socio-economic groups, or cover for a conspiracy to dissipate “consumer freedom.” Even if these claims were true, please notice that they do not constitute good reasons to forgo the proposed discussion; on the contrary, grappling with food ethics in view of our Christian commitments is a prerequisite for discerning the veracity of such claims. Furthermore, it does not bode well for these claims that any respectable food ethics bibliography includes works by people from a wide variety of denominational, political, ethnic, socio-economic, and dietary identities, all of whom stress the urgency of facing the consequences of our diets. (Please do not take my word for it; do the research and see.<sup>1</sup>) As for the idea that our freedom is enhanced by ignorance of the origins of our food and refusal to evaluate the ethics of eating it—well, that one pretty much speaks for itself.

A third potential obstacle, especially in rural congregations and denominations with strong agricultural ties, is the perception that this discussion arises out of hostility toward farmers or a naïve desire to single them out for shame or blame of which the rest of us can disabuse ourselves by eating the occasional veggie-burger. This perception is understandable given that ignorant attitudes toward farming are sadly all too common, and that even legitimate criticism of one’s own livelihood (or that of one’s family or friends) is very difficult to receive. As is the case for all systemic problems entrenched in the institutions of everyday life, however, accepting accountability for the shortcomings of our food system and taking steps to improve it are matters of widely shared responsibility. This reality becomes clearer when we consider the system as a whole and realize that it encompasses all of the following endeavors, among many others:

- Genetic engineering firms design economically advantageous breeds.
- Feed production companies grow, mill, and fortify grain for animal feed.
- Chemical companies produce herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers to grow grain.
- Pharmaceutical companies produce antimicrobials for confined animal populations.
- Agribusiness companies manufacture equipment for raising and slaughtering animals and then buy the animals raised in these systems from producers.
- CAFOs use the above inputs to raise animals.
- Handling companies transport animals from CAFOs to slaughterhouses/packing plants.
- Slaughterhouses/packing plants kill animals and prepare them for distribution.
- Marketing companies design product lines suitable for retail.
- Distributing companies supply retailers.
- Grocery stores, restaurants, and other food retailers sell to consumers.
- Banks and law firms provide financial and legal services to all of the above.

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1 For more on the diversity of perspectives (religious and otherwise) represented in the food ethics literature, see the free resources on Eating as an Act of Justice at the Calvin College Center for Christian Scholarship online at <http://www.calvin.edu/admin/cccs/downloads/foodethics.html>.

- Federal, state, and local regulatory and inspection agencies make and enforce food policy.
- Lobbying agencies work to secure favorable legislative and regulatory conditions.
- Members of Congress represent the economic interests of the food industries in their states.

In view of the complexity of this system and the fact that consumer demand for cheap, widely available animal products largely commands it, we should be reluctant indeed to saddle farmers with a disproportionate share of the responsibility as we consider the unintended consequences of our choices.

One last concern to set aside is the worry that my suggestion that the church should take a more critical stance on SAD is freighted with an expectation that the church should endorse some specific alternative to it. Let me be clear that my intent in this article is very explicitly to decouple the *critical case against* SAD from any *positive case* that might be made *for* this or that alternative (say, flexitarian, locavore/agrarian, vegetarian, or vegan). In my opinion, the discernment process best suited to the church's earliest dealings with these new challenges is one that is unflinchingly critical of the very real moral and practical failings of our food system, but that nonetheless exercises caution and humility in its recommendations for responding to the crisis. Simultaneously, the church must call Christians to task on the kingdom work of regenerating our fallen food system, while allowing space for people to discern how their individual consciences and callings gear into the long process of cultural change that will attend the shift toward a more conscientious and just, if always still flawed, system.

It would appear, then, that it is possible to subject SAD to scrutiny without endorsing a joyless, works-based asceticism; or being duped by alleged adversaries in the culture wars; or behaving self-righteously toward people in agriculture; or taking an exclusionary "one-size-fits-all" approach to discerning a more ethical diet. Nevertheless, mindfulness of the risks represented by these concerns is valuable both as a check on the temptation to behave badly and as a reminder of the types of worries that make food ethics seem intimidating or objectionable to newcomers.

## Challenging the Standard American Diet

I now turn to the case against SAD. My claim is that, *prima facie* ("on first appearance" or "at first blush"), our default dietary practices are not spiritually beneficial. My decision to offer a *prima facie* case instead of a more ambitious one—say, a case that attempts to prove that SAD is not spiritually beneficial—is cautious in some respects but provocative in others. Caution is required because the system is too complex and my talents too limited to offer more in this context than an impressionistic sketch of why a thoughtful Christian considering the available evidence should acknowledge (at first blush, anyway) that SAD is a recipe for spiritual stagnation and even decline. By admitting up front that the issue is complicated and that there is no presumption here of having the last word, I hope to avoid the overconfident, overreaching posture that often attends religious calls to perceived spiritual flourishing.



But provocation is also part of the strategy, both because a *prima facie* case is often more accessible and intuitive to everyday folks than a more involved case that people can be easily forgiven for ignoring or misunderstanding, and because such a case has a certain burden-shifting quality. More specifically, if there is a standing, widely accessible *prima facie* case to be made that SAD is not spiritually beneficial, it is fair to say that SAD's default status among North American Christians requires explanation. Indeed, thoughtful people faced with such a case—at least those with the freedom to pursue dietary alternatives—would have roughly the following three options: they could persist with SAD, attempting to justify it by defeating the *prima facie* case against it; they could persist with SAD, confessing their weakness of will to do otherwise; or they could eschew SAD and take steps toward a more conscientious diet. In any event, it is difficult to see how SAD could retain its default status in the absence of a compelling rebuttal to a strong *prima facie* case against it.

For building this case, the following five traditional sources for Christian moral deliberation seem especially worthy of consideration (though surely there are others): the Christian vision; church teaching; the Bible; general revelation; and discernment of the fruits of the spirit. I will consider each briefly in turn, acknowledging that the relationships among them are complicated and their boundaries porous; my intent here is not to posit a rigid taxonomy, but to think through the heuristic value of each of these theoretically distinguishable if practically interwoven sources for our discernment process.

What I have in mind by “the Christian vision” is the grand theological sweep of the narrative on which the Christian imagination feeds and in which the practices of everyday Christ-following are broadly contextualized. Doubtless, each Christian community inflects this vision uniquely, but all are players in something like the following cosmic drama:

Creation—God created the world, established an ordered harmony among its creatures, and called creation very good. Creation belongs to God, God loves and delights in it, and human beings, as special creations in God's image, are called to mirror God's divine love and delight in stewarding creation on God's behalf.

Fall—The corruptive power of human sin affects all aspects of creation, degrading individuals and institutions alike. Even those who strive, albeit imperfectly, to reach the highest standards of personal piety are nonetheless complicit in institutional injustices by virtue of their participation in fallen religious, social, cultural, and economic practices and systems.

Redemption—In Jesus Christ, God manifests desire and agency to renew fallen creation at all levels, and calls Christians to be agents of this renewal in faithful anticipation of Christ's return. This calling pertains to the renewal of our personal lives, but also to the renewal of the institutions in which we live and work—ongoing tasks that are fitted to our personal vocations and to the communal challenges of our time and place by the Spirit's inspiration.

Although this vision does not put food ethics explicitly front and center, it delimits a framework in which—on first blush, anyway—it seems entirely expectable that food ethics would



be an important concern. Within this framework, God's interest in the flourishing of creation, our responsibility for its stewardship, the fallenness of a food system that affects all levels of creation, and our call to work toward the renewal of that system (ideally, to the fullest extent our vocations and resources permit) are all taken as givens. Indeed, if there is good reason to believe that our food system is contributing significantly to the degradation of creation, it is difficult to see how willful ignorance or indifference to this concern could be compatible with the Christian vision. The generality of this vision, however, requires looking elsewhere for the details.

A second key source for this purpose is church teaching. The history of ecclesial attention to food ethics across various Christian traditions is a compelling resource unto itself, with monastic diets modeled on Edenic innocence, Franciscan concern for the flourishing of animals and flora, and the prominence of fasting disciplines among many highlights that testify to the church's abiding interest in creation care and food ethics.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes here, however, it will suffice to observe the growing ecumenical consensus on the urgency of the present environmental crisis as a clear indication that SAD will not fare well under increased scrutiny from the church.<sup>3</sup>

In an act of solidarity between West and East, Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew I issued a *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics*, enjoining their churches to "undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production."<sup>4</sup> Among Protestants, the Episcopal Church<sup>5</sup> has led the way for mainline denominations, and one of the boldest calls to action has issued from American evangelicalism. Boasting nearly 500 signatures from prominent evangelicals, the *Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation* calls upon "all Christians to work for godly, just, and sustainable economies" based upon "careful consideration of how our corporate and individual actions respect and comply with God's ordinances for creation." As followers of Jesus, we are called to "resist the allure of wastefulness and overconsumption by making personal lifestyle choices that express humility, forbearance, self restraint and

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2 David Grummett and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* (New York: Routledge, 2010). See also *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology* (ed. David Grummett and Rachel Muers; New York: T & T Clark, 2008).

3 For access to Christian statements on the environment, visit Green Faith online at <http://greenfaith.org/religious-teachings/christian-statements-on-the-environment>; on animals, visit HSUS Faith Outreach <http://www.humanesociety.org/about/departments/faith/facts/statements>. Accessed April 9, 2013.

4 *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics* of John Paul II and The Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I, Monday 10 June, 2002. Available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20020610\\_venice-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration_en.html). Accessed May 15, 2013.

5 For information on the creation care initiatives in the Episcopal Church, see the Episcopal Ecological Network online at <http://www.eenonline.org>. Accessed April 9, 2013.

frugality.”<sup>6</sup> Though these declarations leave it to the reader to discern which “unsustainable patterns of consumption” to eschew, the mounting evidence suggests that SAD is among the most deserving of criticism.

These church declarations also provide important perspective on how to interpret what is simultaneously the most obvious and the most challenging source for Christian insight into food ethics: the Bible. The fact that these churches are disciplined to the authority of Scripture but able nonetheless to speak prophetically to contemporary problems that are not directly or unambiguously addressed in Scripture (e.g., environmental degradation and climate change) is powerful testimony to the Bible’s ability to steer us in the right direction even when the specific paths and the final destination are not as clearly marked as fallen, finite human beings might like.

Indeed, those who go to the Bible looking for an open highway to the one true Christian diet usually end up perplexed. The bookends of Eden and the peaceable kingdom (cf. Isa 11:6–9) might seem to show that God’s ideal for human beings is a plant-based diet, but the giving of animals to Noah for food and Jesus eating fish (among other things) complicate the picture, suggesting that eating animals is permissible, at least in some circumstances. The strict dietary laws of the Hebrew Bible seem to show that reservations about unrestrained omnivorism have a divine precedent, but Paul enjoins us not to let dietary differences inhibit fellowship. A diet of vegetables emboldens Daniel in the lion’s den, yet Paul curiously appears to associate vegetarianism with weak faith. Evidence of God’s love and care for animals abounds throughout the scriptural record, but that record also includes animal sacrifice, at least until the Passover lamb gives way to the Last Supper—an event memorialized in the sacrament of a simple vegetarian meal. The debate that ensues from these tensions has ancient roots in both Judaism and Christianity, and the biblical interpretation involved in discerning their contemporary significance traverses controversial theological and philosophical terrain.<sup>7</sup>

Some of us find theoretical disputations over these ambiguities both fascinating and indispensable for discerning and fine-tuning our dietary discipleship. Others of us (likely the solid majority) find them tedious, frustrating, or even bewildering, if we entertain them at all. Happily for all of us, the Bible welcomes and repays deep theoretical engagement with these issues but does not require it of everyone, and comes equipped with at least two internally-approved, practically-oriented disambiguation devices designed for trouble-shooting these tensions in the here and now: the

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6 *An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation*, Evangelical Environmental Network. The full text of the document and a link to a partial list of signatories may be viewed online at <http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php>. Accessed April 9, 2013.

7 On Judaism, see Roberta Kalechofky, *Judaism and Animal Rights: Classical and Contemporary Responses* (Boston: Micah Books, 1992) and Richard Schwartz, *Judaism and Vegetarianism* (New York: Lantern, 2001). On Christianity, see Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); and *A Faith Embracing All Creatures* (ed. Tripp York and Andy Alexis-Baker; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

assurance that general revelation (or the teachings of the book of nature) will be consistent with the directives of special revelation (Scripture); and the Pauline injunction—in the absence of unambiguous directives—to follow the Holy Spirit where it leads and to know it by its fruits.

To my mind, the honest consultation of these two sources—general revelation and discernment of the fruits of the Spirit—is where the rubber really hits the road for the case against SAD. It is by recourse to these sources that the intimate particulars of our individual lives and our present cultural circumstances gain traction in the broader Christian vision, enabling the living legacies of church teaching and scriptural interpretation to revive us again at precisely this time and place. Regrettably, SAD is apparently faring very poorly on both of these measures.

As for what has been generally revealed, when it comes to discerning the crux of the most urgent problems emanating from SAD, our appetite for animal products takes center stage. The obvious concerns about human health and animal exploitation get the most attention. But when one considers the environmental impact of food production, one discovers that industrial animal agriculture is the leading contributor.<sup>8</sup> And when one investigates trade inequities that render subsistence farming in the developing world (and thus food security for billions) increasingly difficult, one finds increasing demand for inexpensive animal products (and the government subsidies required to keep feed grain cheap) at the source. It makes sense, then, to prioritize the focus on animal products, even though there are other problems with SAD (highly-processed, low nutrient-density) and industrial agriculture (monocropping corn [planting the same crop year after year on the same land], genetically modified organism [GMO] products) that deserve attention. The massive fallout of our appetite for animal products is widely documented, but a brief overview of several main areas of concern must suffice here.<sup>9</sup>

*Animal exploitation.* Animals used for food are raised in confinement systems that cause them acute and chronic suffering, that systematically frustrate their species-appropriate behaviors (which they were created to engage in), and that nearly always result in their early deaths. Roughly nine billion animals are slaughtered annually for food in the U.S. (not including billions of fish and other aquatic animals used for food), and Americans consume nearly 200 pounds of meat per person per year—almost twice the global average. At the same time as we exploit, kill, and eat this historically unprecedented number of animals, we know more than ever about their complex cognitive,

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8 See *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006); and The Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, *Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2009). The latter report is available online at <http://ncifap.org/>. Accessed April 30, 2013.

9 For accessible overviews of these problems written from a Christian perspective, see Norman Wirzba, *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 71–109; and Matthew C. Halteman, *Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation* (Washington, DC: HSUS Faith Outreach, 2008), 23–36. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* (New York: Little Brown, 2009) offers a detailed book-length overview. Further bibliographical resources are available online at <http://www.calvin.edu/admin/cccs/downloads/foodethics.html>. Accessed April 9, 2013.

emotional, and social lives and the vulnerability to harm that accompanies these capacities, not just from the work of scientists and animal ethicists,<sup>10</sup> but also from our daily experience with the companion animals who live in almost 70% of our households.<sup>11</sup>

*Poor stewardship of resources.* As globalization has expanded the middle class, the global demand for meat has drastically increased, putting significant strain on the scarce resources used to produce meat: large quantities of land, grain, water, petroleum (for herbicide, pesticide, and transportation), and pharmaceuticals (anti-microbial drugs for confined animal populations—some 60% of the world's supply of anti-microbial drugs are given to animals). As these trends continue in developing countries that are increasingly abandoning traditional plant-based diets to adopt the Western diet, this system will become all the more unsustainable.

*Environmental degradation.* Given the resource-intensity of the system, its significant environmental fallout is expectable: soil erosion, deforestation, air and water pollution, reduced biodiversity, destruction of marine eco-systems, and global warming. Animal agriculture is conservatively estimated to be responsible for 18% of anthropogenic greenhouse gasses—a number that is higher than that attributed to the transportation sector.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, plant-based diets are widely acknowledged to have considerably smaller carbon footprints.

*Marginalizing the poor.* This system (and the questionable resource management and environmental fallout that accompanies it) is marginalizing the poor by degrading the quality of life in rural communities; exploiting a workforce comprised disproportionately of minorities;<sup>13</sup> rendering subsistence farming in other countries untenable; and affecting “environmental apartheid” on the developing world by saddling them with the ecological consequences of global warming—externalities for which they are the least responsible and with which they are least equipped to deal.<sup>14</sup>

*Declining health.* SAD has been strongly correlated with the onset of many “diseases of affluence”—obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, stroke—that degrade the quality of our lives (and deaths) and put preventable stress on our flagging healthcare system. By contrast, diets rich in plant-based whole foods are strongly correlated with substantially reduced incidences of such diseases.<sup>15</sup>

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10 See, for instance, Jonathan Balcombe, *Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and Temple Grandin, *Animals in Translation* (New York: Scribner, 2005).

11 For a closer look, see Matthew C. Halteman, “Varieties of Harm to Animals in Industrial Farming,” *Journal of Animal Ethics* 1.2 (2011): 122–31.

12 *Livestock's Long Shadow*, 38. A more recent study has estimated the number at upwards of 50%; see Robert Goodland and Jeff Anhang, “Livestock and Climate Change,” *World Watch Magazine* (November/December 2009): 10–19.

13 Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2011).

14 Uma Lele, “Food Security for a Billion Poor,” *Science* 327 (26 March 2010): 1554.

15 Dr. Michael Greger's NutritionFacts.org is a good resource for staying abreast of the latest peer-reviewed nutrition science on these matters. Accessed April 9, 2013.

What the book of nature seems to be teaching us through scientific, social, and philosophical inquiry and basic common sense alike is that SAD and the system that feeds it are generating and contributing to very serious moral and practical problems at all levels of creation. Our final task, then, is to consider how persisting with SAD in the face of this evidence squares with our call to harvest the fruits of the spirit. Sadly, sincere discernment here will confront us with some ugly questions.

Are we loving of God, self, and neighbor, or is our joy increased when we knowingly consume a diet that threatens our health, burdens our healthcare system, contributes to the impoverishment of the poor, and causes needless suffering to God's creatures? Do we sow the seeds of peace or bless others with our generosity when we dine on such an inequitable and unsustainable distribution of resources? Are patience and self-control exemplified in the engineering of animals that grow unnaturally fast on monocropped grain so that we can eat whatever, whenever we like, regardless of the constraints of healthy animal bodies and fertile topsoil? Are we consistently kind in welcoming horses, dogs, cats, and cockatiels as cherished members of our families while treating cows, pigs, chickens, and turkeys endowed with the same creaturely capacities as mere units of consumption? Are we faithfully seeking justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God, striving to think and act upon whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise in God's beloved creation? Are we good shepherds, such that mercy is the hallmark of our dominion over other creatures, all the days of their lives?

Admittedly, I chose these questions carefully for service to my case, and there will doubtless be times when the pursuit of competing goods muddles discernment or striving after the same fruit in different contexts generates conflict. Sometimes, a little sincere reflection will reveal the conflict to be spurious; maybe eating a triple bacon-burger makes us temporarily happy, but it is probably disingenuous to claim joy. Other cases might be more perplexing. The perennial concern of eating differently while maintaining loving, patient, generous fellowship with those who do not or cannot follow suit is one such challenge. I commend these sorts of cases to the conscience of the reader, confident that our freedom in Christ to adjudicate these situations without judging one another is entirely compatible with a general admonishment to the church and its members to face the apparent consequences of SAD and to resolve to do better, if no defense of the status quo is forthcoming.

The bad news, in my view, is that the case against SAD appears compelling; I am open to correction, but it seems quite clear to me, on the basis of both the concerns articulated here and others I could not address in the space provided,<sup>16</sup> that persisting with SAD is not spiritually beneficial.

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16 Foremost among these unmentioned concerns is the intersection of food ethics and questions concerning institutional sexism and racism—two other areas in which the Christian witness needs work. See Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York: Continuum, 1990); Marti Kheel, *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); and *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society* (ed. A. Breeze Harper; Brooklyn: Lantern, 2010).

At best, these eating habits consign us to stagnation—they keep us clinging to a vision of feeding the world that, however noble in origin, has resulted in unintended consequences that we can no longer afford to ignore. At worst, they have us well down the path to despoiling our best fruits, such that further denial seems increasingly likely to reap bumper crops of indifference, despair, conflict, anxiety, cruelty, stinginess of spirit, inauthenticity, and selfishness.

The good news, if I may speak personally, is that the journey into discerning and habituating a more conscientious approach to eating can be one of the most illuminating, empowering, and exhilarating spiritual adventures of one's life. Far from the legalistic asceticism that I worried might spring from these pangs of dietary conscience, my life post-SAD has been filled with liberating discoveries: fresh, bracing insight into my most basic spiritual convictions; new and challenging relationships with inspiring people (farmers, food activists) and beautiful places (farms, sanctuaries, urban gardens, and package free grocery stores); transformative dialogue and action with students, colleagues, friends and family; new horizons in scholarship and teaching; intimacy with dazzling previously unfamiliar world cuisines; and even fellowship in a church that offers plant-based meals as a part of its hospitality ministry.

Each of us faces different prospects and challenges when it comes to negotiating with SAD amidst our unique callings, commitments, and church communities. It is not always easy work. Still, I commend it to the reader as deeply rewarding work.<sup>17</sup> By all appearances, the advent of churches and congregants supporting one another in open and intentional discernment over how to eat like 21st-century Christians should be widely encouraged and embraced, at least if we believe that our witness to the good news can still speak hope to the most pressing problems of our age.<sup>18</sup>

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17 I sketch some practical strategies for discerning these prospects and challenges in *Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation*, 5–19, and in “Food for Thought: Practical Advice for Peaceful Eating,” HSUS Faith Outreach Resources, n.p. Online: [http://www.humanesociety.org/about/departments/faith/tips/food\\_for\\_thought.html](http://www.humanesociety.org/about/departments/faith/tips/food_for_thought.html). Accessed April 25, 2013.

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