

FOOD AND FAITH

A Theology of Eating

Why?

To eat is to savour and struggle with the mystery of being God's creatures.

How?

Real food, the food that is the source of creaturely health and delight, is precious because it is a fundamental means through which God's nurture and love for the whole creation are expressed.

Against Idolatry

The goal of eating is not to worship food or ourselves. Nor is it to offer food production and consumption to the modern idols of control, efficiency, and convenience.



Thinking about Food

Food is about the relationships that join us to the earth, fellow creatures, loved ones and guests, and ultimately God. How we eat testifies to whether we value the creatures we live with and depend upon. To eat is to savour and struggle with the mystery of being God's creatures.

Therefore, food is a holy and humbling mystery. Every time a creature eats, it participates in God's life-giving yet costly ways, ways that simultaneously affirm creation as a delectable gift, and as a divinely ordered membership of inter-dependent need and suffering and help. Whenever people come to the table, they demonstrate with the unmistakable evidence of their stomachs that they are not self-subsisting gods. They are finite and mortal creatures dependent on God's many good gifts: sunlight, photosynthesis, decomposition, soil fertility, water, bees and butterflies, chickens, sheep, cows, gardeners, farmers, cooks, strangers, and friends (the list goes on and on). Eating reminds us that we participate in a grace-saturated world, a blessed creation worthy of attention, care, and celebration.

Despite what food marketers may say, there really is no such thing as “cheap” or “convenient” food. Real food, the food that is the source of creaturely health and delight, is precious because it is a fundamental means through which God’s nurture and love for the whole creation are expressed.

Sadly, the character and pace of much contemporary life makes it less likely that people will perceive the mystery of food or receive it as a precious gift and sign of God’s sustaining care. Though information about food abounds, many of today’s eaters are among the most ignorant the world has ever known. This is because people lack the sensitivity, imagination, and understanding that come from the growing, preserving, and preparing of food. Not having the attention or skill that develops while working in a garden and kitchen, they also miss the necessary knowledge, affection, and insight. Too many people don’t really know where food comes from or what is practically required (ecologically but also culturally) for food to be healthy and plentiful over the long term.

The way we think about food depends on how we name and narrate the world in which we eat. Food does not simply appear, nor is everything food. It is a chosen and named entity that draws its significance from the wider natural and cultural contexts in which it appears.

A theological account names and narrates the world as “creation.” Though not necessarily opposed to scientific narrations of the world as nature, a narration of the world as creation means that our descriptions of the world’s members and our telling of the meaning of the world’s movements must always be articulated with reference to God as the world’s source, sustenance, and end. Understood as creation, the world is not a random accident nor is it valueless matter waiting for us to give it significance. It is, rather, the concrete expression of God’s hospitable love making room for what is not God to be and to flourish. Theologically understood, food is not reducible to material stuff. It is the provision and nurture of God made pleasing and delectable. It is the daily reminder that life and death come to us as gifts.



Food is a gift of love. As with all of creation, food does not have to be. The fact that it is, and that it has the potential to occasion great delight, is a sign that God made the world not out of boredom but out of joy. Therefore, to receive food as a gift and as a declaration of God’s love and joy is to receive food in a theological manner. That means that eating is not reducible to the consumption of others. Instead, it is about extending hospitality and making room for others to find life by sharing in our own. Self-offering, accepting responsibility for another’s well-being, turning one’s own life into nurture for others—these are the signs of life as empowered by the Spirit. Eating, in other words, is an invitation to enter into communion and be reconciled with each other. To eat with God at the table is to eat with the aim of healing and celebrating the memberships of creation.

We can now see that a central task of a theology of eating is to help us guard against idolatry, which we can here briefly describe as the effort to magnify and promote human power. The goal of eating is not to worship food or ourselves. Nor is it to offer food production and consumption to the modern idols of control, efficiency, and convenience.