

Local Church Ministry Around Food: An Exploration and Theological Reflection upon Current Communal Eating Practices.¹

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ABSTRACT

This article observes and outlines my personal church-based experience with communal food practices and reflects upon the wider contemporary situation. It undertakes to explain and make sense of why these practices occur by reflecting upon biblical, theological, historical and cultural influences and insights around food and eating. It acknowledges that it is not sufficient to merely observe and understand the present situation, the relevant contributing factors, and the current theological view. Instead, it sets out to consider what should ideally be taking place. This is undertaken through the use of a mutually critical correlation methodology within practical theology, which seeks to not only understand what is occurring but to change the situation if and where warranted. This article explores the current narrative around food which is shaped by secular influences such as dualism, commodification and consumerism. It reflects upon the original intention for food as a gift which honours both Creator and created. It proceeds to examine ramifications of the Fall upon the way food is understood, as well as redemptive, reconciling and restorative aspects of the food story. As this biblical narrative is explored, food begins to take on new meanings and symbols, and finally food comes to be seen not as a commodity but as communion--a gift of God for both physical and spiritual nourishment. The biblical narrative demonstrates food's capacity to bring people together in celebration, enjoyment, connection, and unity. This ultimately signifies a powerful link between food and salvation, where fellowship with God and others is fulfilling in ways beyond the physical satisfaction gained through eating. This article proposes changes to current communal practices, attitudes and understandings around food.

Introduction

This article explores the current communal practices and theology around food within my local church and reflects upon their relevance and consistency with Scripture, both with the aim of moving towards more faithful communal eating practices. Through such reflection we will come to understand the intended purpose for food and its consumption, and how our

¹ This article is a condensed form of a project completed for an MA(Min) at Malyon Theological College in May 2018.

practices are often shaped more by the surrounding culture than by biblical reflection. For when we truly understand food within its biblical context, our practices are shaped by that understanding. Questions concerning what we eat or do not eat, then become important theological considerations as they reflect upon the meaning and purpose of food, as well as upon the act of sharing food together. This article will focus on the original intention for food, particularly with respect to food as a gift from God, and the honouring of both Creator and created.

What follows is therefore a personal transformative theological reflection² as it seeks to make sense of my own experiences, observations and struggles around communal food consumption in the local church, interact with other disciplines, and equip me to more faithfully serve God. This is done through a mutually critical correlation methodology,³ by discovering where secular and theological perspectives affirm, reject, interact and cooperate with each other. It seeks to develop principles to inform both current attitude and action, guiding how our theology can faithfully be mirrored through our communal church eating practices.

A personal reflection

I have utilised Browning's VOTER approach⁴ to reflect upon current practice around food within my local church, and the wider community, and upon attitudes and meanings I observe as being attached to food in those settings.

We begin at the morning tea table of my local church. The experiences I share are my own personal subjective experiences, shared in relation to a specific church context and shaped by my own journey of awareness around food, health and physical wellbeing. I have chosen to specifically reflect upon this one area of communal food consumption as it is a regular part of the weekly functioning of the church. When the church was established, there was a tremendous emphasis on morning tea and particularly coffee. Following the service, a wonderful spread of food was supplied. As a new church, eager to engage with the local community, these ministries around food and drink were identified as pivotal drawcards. The expectations were set in place: morning tea would be something to look forward to, something to come to church for, something to stay around for. Food was there to be eaten and fully enjoyed, and food provided an environment conducive to fellowship. A vision concerning communal food was established.

² I have utilised Benson's five movement model adaptation of Osmer's four task scheme of practical theological reflection (Benson, "Schools, Scripture and Secularisation," 17; Osmer, *Practical Theology*)

³ The work of Browning has influenced the way I have undertaken this methodological approach (*Fundamental Practical Theology*).

⁴ Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*.

From the church's foundation to present day, I noticed those on morning tea felt an obligation to satisfy the consumer, with visual appeal, taste and quantity. I observed that this obligation sat within the church's primary mission to "make disciples" as the provision of morning tea was identified as a way to attract and keep attendees by providing greater opportunities for fellowship. People tended to stay longer when more food was available. The food itself was therefore seen as a means to an end. What was provided or eaten did not appear to matter. Food was merely something to be consumed.

As one who provided morning tea, I experienced pressure to provide a particular kind of morning tea. I certainly felt discouraged when my food was left behind in preference for the donuts provided by another. People tended to go for the item which they perceived satisfied their craving for maximum enjoyment. Conversely, many people consumed greater amounts of food because it was available. I observed people struggling to place boundaries around their consumption, particularly children. People demonstrated both a need to eat food, whether that be for sustenance or to satisfy hunger, but also the enjoyment and pleasure which came from eating and connecting with others as they did so.

Clearly decisions around the food provided and eaten were multi-faceted and culturally shaped. For example, decisions concerning the children's morning tea were made with social pressures in mind. Parents were given scope to provide for the children in the way that best fit their budget, time constraints and own ideas about food. However, I observed that the large spread of biscuits, cakes and variety of sugar-laden treats particularly kept children occupied and happy. Happy children also meant parents had more freedom to talk with others. Within my church I observed that the enjoyment of food and the company of others were inherently linked. Food was identified as enabling and enhancing conversations and fellowship. Food was generally seen through the lens of personal enjoyment; the expectation was that people could make their own choices. Adults were expected to be responsible for what they and their children ate. Food was not evaluated by its ability to nurture the physical body, and the effects of food consumption were not considered primary issues.

The local contemporary culture appears to support many of the patterns I was observing in my church around food and its enjoyment. Food is recognised for its ability to provide opportunities for meaningful connection with others--with cost, convenience and personal responsibility key factors in choice. The church exists in a time and place where "good coffee" is expected, as validated by the plethora of specialist coffee shops in the local area. The dominant role of the coffee shop also as a meeting place is demonstrated by advertising campaigns embedded with pictures of smiling, connecting patrons⁵ and the industry has

⁵ The Coffee Club, ["Where will I meet you?"](#)

shown steady growth over the past five years.⁶ Shows like “My Kitchen Rules” and “Masterchef” promote food as a highly pleasurable experience and highlight that the consumer’s satisfaction is paramount. So, given the cultural context, my story is not surprising.

Yet, from a contemporary perspective, there is an increasing awareness of the link between food consumption and illnesses such as diabetes and obesity. So much so, that there are greater restrictions on what school canteens can sell.⁷ It is increasingly being recognised that food consumption has consequences, and that there are physiological, social and ethical implications to what we eat. So, whilst there seems to be parallels, there also appears to be some divergence between what I see as going on in my church community and rumblings within contemporary culture.

An examination of some historical, cultural and theological contributions to the current view of food consumption

I identified that food is seen as enjoyable, desirable, convenient, and a matter of personal preference, and that food and connection with others are purposefully linked. Ultimately food is understood as something to be consumed and valued for its ability to enable fellowship. Having described the practice of communal eating in context, I will now examine some of the historical, cultural and theological contributions to the current story, to understand why this situation is going on.

There are a tremendous number of contributing factors at play, as well as many approaches to a study of food consumption.⁸ I therefore acknowledge the benefits of a multi-disciplinary approach. Whilst my examination is not exhaustive, I have chosen to focus on historical and cultural changes in the way we look at both food and the body, links between food and the body, as well as the role of consumerism as factors in my current story.

Historical changes to the way we have come to look at food

In the early 1900s, as nutrition became a discipline of study, food was increasingly recognised as the supplier of basic human needs, de-emphasizing the role of God as provider.⁹ Changing consumer demands, socio-economic circumstances, and patterns of family and social life, as well as an information explosion around food, have all contributed to the way we currently approach food as a society.¹⁰ We are consuming increasing amounts of

⁶ Mordor Intelligence, “Australia Coffee Market.”

⁷ NSW Department of Education, “Food and Drink Criteria.”

⁸ Murcott, *Food Habits*, 15-16.

⁹ Huang, “Role of Food,” 3.

¹⁰ Wahlqvist, *Food and Nutrition*, 164; See also Murcott, 27-28.

processed foods,¹¹ and have developed a fast-food taste.¹² “Our accelerated culture” has social and psychological impacts,¹³ with a complex interplay of money, time and place shaping the diet of any group (171). The food landscape changed as competing considerations entered the picture. There are new social and economic factors involved in the choices being made by those both providing and consuming morning tea, and those choices in turn reflect our values and identity, mirroring social trends and changing behaviours (170).

Cultural links between food consumption and the physical body

Aware that there is a complex relationship between diet and other risk factors and disease, major contemporary health issues such as diabetes and obesity¹⁴ have been linked to food consumption.¹⁵ Reported cases of diabetes have tripled over the last three decades according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare,¹⁶ yet diabetes can be delayed through lifestyle choices such as healthy eating.¹⁷ Australia now also has more than nine million adults considered obese or overweight, making us the fattest nation in the world. And like diabetes, there are considerable health problems and consequences associated with these conditions.¹⁸

The World Health Organisation acknowledges that “the fundamental cause of obesity and [being] overweight is an energy imbalance between calories consumed and calories expended.”¹⁹ Statistics reveal children’s increased consumption of high energy foods like cakes, biscuits, soft drinks, confectionary and other sugar based foods, and diets high in fat or sugar, and lacking sufficient nutrients are contributing factors to obesity and diabetes.²⁰ For this reason alone, it could be considered valid to challenge the choices we place before our children.

Whilst there are many reasons why food consumption patterns have shifted towards unhealthier options,²¹ the study by Ferraro²² demonstrates that those with higher levels of so called religiosity tend to be more obese. Rick Warren’s moment of revelation concerning the number of people who were overweight came during a baptismal service²³ and was the impetus for the development of “The Daniel Plan” and a widespread change in congregational

¹¹ Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 18.

¹² Bentley, *Cultural History of Food*, 14.

¹³ Huntley, *Food and Equality*, 175.

¹⁴ This article acknowledges the prevalence of specific eating disorders whilst not exploring them here.

¹⁵ Healey, “Food and Nutrition,” 1.

¹⁶ Australian Government, [“Diabetes Overview.”](#)

¹⁷ Healey, “Diabetes,” 5.

¹⁸ Healey, “Obesity Epidemic,” 3.

¹⁹ World Health Organisation, [“Obesity and Overweight.”](#)

²⁰ Henry, “Australian lifestyle diseases.”

²¹ World Health Organisation, [“Healthy Diet.”](#)

²² Ferraro, “Firm Believers,” 232.

²³ Amen, Hymen and Warren, *Daniel Plan*, 13.

awareness (15). As a Southern Baptist pastor, he and his congregation were ranked as amongst the most overweight of all denominations in Ferraro's study. Ferraro however concluded that this perhaps reflected "religion's emphasis upon tolerating human weakness and its emphasis upon other forms of deviancy such as alcoholism, smoking, and sexual promiscuity."²⁴ Therefore, he claimed that silence on issues around excess weight and their function as a vehicle for social acceptance were contributing factors (238). Whilst identifying that religious affiliation does not constrain body weight, he however highlighted that obesity was lesser of an issue in denominations where health protective behaviours were stressed.²⁵ Yet, whilst appreciating there may be other factors involved, I would propose that a greater contributing factor is the view held of the physical body by many who identify as "religious".

Historical ways the body has been understood

Hecht²⁶ helpfully surveys biblical scholarship on the body from 1950 through 1990, commenting that the rise of Gnosticism in the second century was a significant threat to the early church. Its dualistic basis identified a division between two opposing and cosmic forces; the physical realm was branded as evil, whilst the spiritual good (4). Anderson further acknowledges that "traditional Evangelicalism has deeply Gnostic tendencies."²⁷ He examines historical perceptions of the body: the body as a prison for the "purer, more refined soul," the notion of the body as a "machine," and the resulting divide between the body-as-machine and the body-as-mystery (49). All have influenced how we regard the body, and I would suggest lead to an unnatural disconnect between the needs of the physical and spiritual, both of which were significant when food was initially created.

I particularly understand such influences as contributing to our current communal practices as follows: First, I identify the lack of attention to the merits of looking after the physical body's wellbeing. I cannot recall a sermon which challenged me to care for my physical body by considering what I ate or drank.²⁸ My church has a strong emphasis on exegetical teaching, the goal being to equip disciples. In many ways the growth of those disciples is measured by a commitment to follow Christ which is revealed in an increasing knowledge of the Bible. Transformation is firstly about the soul and mind. Yet, I observe a lack of reflection concerning the wellbeing of the physical body as if it really is not significant.

²⁴ Ferraro, 236.

²⁵ Conversely, Wansink's study demonstrated that environmental factors such as accessibility, visibility and portion size influence eating because they increase consumption norms ("Mindless Eating," 454-455).

²⁶ Hecht, "Developing a Theology."

²⁷ Anderson, *Earthen Vessels*, 32.

²⁸ Singer and Mason comment that less attention has been paid to what we eat with the major focus instead being an avoidance of gluttony (*Ethics*, 1).

Second, overweight people within our congregation have not generally been encouraged towards healthier eating practices. However, I have observed that spiritually they have been nurtured. I propose that one is seen as their personal responsibility, whilst the other to be in the realm of the church. Body and soul are handled separately. I have observed a tendency to blame those who are overweight for their own physical condition.²⁹ But I would suggest that even more than that, there is no acknowledgement that the care of the physical body is worthy of contemplation when one seeks to live out the call to “be Holy” (1 Pet. 1:15-16). Third, historically there appears to be a persistent trend of polarizing food as either good or bad, yet this tendency has been replaced in the church by the desire to have freedom over what one eats.³⁰ “For Christians the lack of any food rules at all is often a badge of distinction. Since the time of Augustine, food rules have been seen as markers of other religions, to be broken by Christians to prove that Christ has set them free,”³¹ spreading the idea that food is a non-issue for Christians. “Christians have eaten whatever they please.”³² Within my church I have observed a valuing of freedom of choice, and care taken not to categorise foods as good or bad, but that all is permissible.

The contribution of consumerism to our current story

Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight³³ helpfully describe the nature of what they identify as the current cultural narrative: the “Free Market Consumer Ideology.” They suggest that the consumer culture in which we are living invades “our ways of being together and what we value” (xiv). This narrative is characterised by a worldview shaped by market forces, an elevation of individual rights and interests, with whatever we have never being enough (xvii). Such a narrative relies on ideas of needs--whether real or perceived--has an absence of limits and restraints and is “indifferent to gifts” (1-2). I observe this narrative within my church. I identify the minimal restraints placed upon food provided, the unspoken rights of people to eat whatever they want, the food provided shaped by popular trends, identity often measured by the ability to satisfy others, and the disappointment on children’s faces when the food runs out. Consumerism is embedded into our cultural practice and beliefs³⁴ and “in a consumerist world, the only goodness things have is what we assign to them” (67). Food is seen through the lens of personal consumption and judged by its ability to bring pleasure.

Theological reflection upon the contemporary situation

Whilst acknowledging there are many contributors to the current situation, I will now reflect theologically on what should be happening, by engaging with the biblical narrative with

²⁹ Huntley, 22.

³⁰ Rousseau, “Food Representations,” 185.

³¹ Grumett, “Case for Food Rules,” 34.

³² Braaten and Braaten, *Living Temple*, 43.

³³ Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight, *An Other Kingdom*.

³⁴ Anderson, 69.

respect to food. I have adapted my categories from the five-act hermeneutical model of N.T. Wright³⁵ as it allows me to reflect upon the origin of food, acknowledge foods' role in biblical history, and embrace the redemptive, reconciliatory and restorative nature of food.³⁶

Food in the Creation Story

In the Garden of Eden food was both pleasing and good to eat, and the story assumes the need to eat without qualification by acknowledging simply that "it shall be food for you."³⁷ There was a need to eat and the food was provided, by God, as a gift (Gen. 1:29). Whilst the food provided for their physical needs, it was also a source of enjoyment, a celebration of God's goodness to them and a way in which they recognised their dependence upon their provider. Here is the original narrative of food, pointing us towards its intent in a sinless world.

Whilst food does have value in and of itself, food is not just content but also the message it carries. This belief resonates with social anthropologists and historians alike.³⁸ Food allows us to uncover hidden levels of meaning in social relationships and sheds light on human experience, underlying beliefs and attitudes.³⁹ But food is much more than the message it carries. Food is a symbol of God's provision for His people, having both physical and spiritual dimensions, "a symbol of God's grace."⁴⁰ Food is not just God's blessing (Deut. 15:14); it is God's blessing shared.⁴¹ Ordinary food is "grace made visible" (362), having a sacramental dimension,⁴² where the enjoyment of food as well as its nourishment "is the most primitive form of gratitude, and of worship."⁴³ As food shifts to its association with an event in time, there is a theological significance that is extraneous to the food (358).

Food therefore is more than a self-focused pleasure, whilst not denying that it can be pleasurable and sustaining. Food has its origins and purpose in the Creator. For when food ceases to be merely a fuel or commodity, "eating becomes a sharing in and a sharing of the blessings of God."⁴⁴ Such an understanding should bring new responses both towards God, such as gratitude and celebration, and in the honouring of the physical body and corporate body of believers through communal food practices. It is not enough to know who has provided the food; we must also respond appropriately to the gift, and gift-giver.

³⁵ Wright, "How can the Bible be Authoritative?"

³⁶ Potential new narratives which could more faithfully represent this biblical narrative can then emerge.

³⁷ Huang, 9.

³⁸ Grumett notes how early breakfast cereals were given names such as Food of Eden and Elijah's Manna in acknowledgment of this reality (35).

³⁹ Kirkby and Luckins, *Dining on Turtles*, 8.

⁴⁰ Harper, "Food as a Symbol," 67.

⁴¹ Mann, "Not by Word Alone," 362.

⁴² "The eating of food becomes a sacramental experience when we acknowledge that the nourishment in our eating, its life-giving quality, is not exhausted by the stuff we eat" (Wirzba, *A Theology of Eating*, 202).

⁴³ Mann, 353.

⁴⁴ Wirzba, "Food for Theologians," 33.

The effects of the Fall upon food

However, it was not long before the narrative changed. The serpent plants the seed of doubt in Eve's mind by offering an alternative and attractive scenario (Gen. 3:1-4) and Adam and Eve exchange life giving truth for a lie. In the Fall, food's role is reversed, eating moves from a "God-focused activity," to a "self-focused" one, food driving them away from God,⁴⁵ becoming a "painful reminder of sin" (12) (Gen. 3:17-19). Sin corrupted the original provision of food (13). Food was "a symbol of obedience to God."⁴⁶ When Adam and Eve shifted their focus from their Creator to themselves, food became a symbol of sacrifice (68) (Gen. 3:23; Lev. 2:3; 3:3).

The origins of the current consumer culture appear to be in the Garden, with Eve the first consumer.⁴⁷ In a similar way, if our morning teas are shaped by our consumer culture, we exchange the original intention of food for the less satisfying lie of personal gratification. The lies may take a different form, but in essence they both lead us to turn our backs on God's provision of food as a gift and demonstration of His goodness, and on God Himself.⁴⁸

Israel's food story

In the Exodus, food becomes a source of "historical knowledge"⁴⁹ with "manna" in the desert providing physically for Israel (Exod. 16:4), testing their faith in God as their provider (Exod. 16:4) and "a means of remembrance of God's deliverance and salvation (Exod. 16:33)" (17). When Jesus comes as the "bread of life," these historical connections are in place (Deut. 8:3) (20). Yet "as each meal of manna was supposed to orient Israel to God, each meal that we eat now ought to orient us to God" (18).

The Israelites were given over to their selfish desires in the wake of their lack of gratitude for the Lord's provision, failing to trust Him and rejecting His gift (Num. 11; Ps. 78:25-32; 106:13-15). Food became a vehicle of judgment rather than the blessing intended. The problem however was not the food, but their self-focused craving. Perhaps similarly, food becomes judgment to the one who cannot control their cravings and finds themselves struggling with the resulting health ramifications.

The Israelites were instructed to praise the Lord, being careful not to forget Him or what He had done (Deut. 8:10-15). So, as we approach eating not as a task, but as "an occasion for

⁴⁵ Huang, 11.

⁴⁶ Harper, 67.

⁴⁷ Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight, xx.

⁴⁸ Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight invite their readers to embrace an alternative narrative, which they identify as a "Neighbourly Covenant". This covenantal approach "leads to a more intimate, a more interdependent way of being" (xxii).

⁴⁹ Huang, 19.

appreciation and enjoyment,⁵⁰ we honour God. “Food is itself a means of revelation. Through eating together we taste the goodness of God” (43), remembering His provision for us with grateful and joyful hearts, appropriately responding to the gift, and to the gift giver’s faithfulness.

Yet this provision also sustains the body, again, the work of the Creator. Our bodies are “created in His image” and “very good” (Gen. 1:27-31), “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:13-14), divine gifts, given by God, not for us to shape into our own images.⁵¹ We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), cultivating a “holy attentiveness,” an ordered response in gratitude (167). The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20), and hence possesses a sacredness to be celebrated and its wellbeing fought for.⁵² Jesus Himself did not ignore the body or food, but understood the role they played, and responded first in gratitude (John 6:11). As we imitate Christ in grateful response to His work of salvation in us, we have an alternative way of not only viewing the body, but of living within that body.⁵³

The redemptive nature of communal food

The Lord’s Supper reinforces the communal nature of eating. We share the bread and cup together. We remember together. We are to do this in remembrance of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:24). This harkens back to the purpose of the Passover in Deuteronomy 16:3--that they might remember.⁵⁴ For both the manna and the bread remind the people of God’s provision for them through salvation. Whilst the manna itself was not sufficient for eternal life (Deut. 8:3), Jesus is explicitly connected with the manna in the “bread of life” discourse (37). It is the Father “who gives you the true bread from heaven” and that bread “gives life to the world” (John 6:33). Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (v35). This bread is linked to eternal life (v51).⁵⁵ The Lord’s Supper points us to the true bread from heaven (v35). We are to eat in remembrance of Him, rejoicing in the One from whom He came. Here “food is a symbol of God’s own sacrifice”; he allowed His life to be broken on the cross, becoming “living bread.”⁵⁶ The Lord’s Supper is a sacrament of God’s creative, redemptive, and reconciling love,⁵⁷ yet our ability to break bread together has often been hampered by cultural influences such as individualism and consumerism (57).

⁵⁰ Jung, *Food for Life*, xiii.

⁵¹ Anderson, 28.

⁵² Braaten and Braaten, xi.

⁵³ Anderson, 87.

⁵⁴ Huang, 35-36.

⁵⁵ Huang comments that John 6:27 reminds us to seek “the food which endures to eternal life” (37). “Physical food is missional in that it points to Jesus Christ as spiritual food” (43).

⁵⁶ Harper, 77.

⁵⁷ McCormick, “How Could we Break,” 47.

The Lord's supper was always celebrated during a meal.⁵⁸ The sharing of the body of Christ was a "communal" act.⁵⁹ However today its celebration appears to have lost some of the original contextual meaning. Whereas eating is often reduced to matters of personal health or enjoyment, in the Lord's supper "the meaning of eating is *only* constructed as it is linked to the gathering of Christ's body across time and space: that is, only as our *bodies* become *one body*" (365). Whilst morning tea is distinct from the Lord's Supper, it too is a communal rather than individual act, and an opportunity to remember, celebrate and embrace the salvific provision of God.

Food as a vehicle for reconciliation

Regrettably our communal food choices appear to be failing to care for our physical bodies and honouring God in the context of a broken food system.⁶⁰ We are "no longer eating food under garden conditions."⁶¹ Changed conditions necessitate changed ways of thinking and behaving (44). Whilst the provision of food for another is a way of communicating our care for them,⁶² sometimes it fails because of the very system we find ourselves in.

In the Mosaic laws, the purpose of the separation of clean and unclean was in ensuring Israel remained holy, as Yahweh was holy.⁶³ The restrictions around food and their relationship with the Lord and others were bound together (Lev. 11:44-45). Choices around food reflect priorities and consequences (Dan. 1:8-16; Ezek. 16:49-50). The Jerusalem Council proposed specific requirements for Gentile believers regarding certain foods (Acts 15:29), with such boundaries a protection from the temptation of idolatry.⁶⁴ Whilst we are not to be burdened by regulations concerning food, decisions around food "must take into loving consideration our brothers and sisters" (40). We are to eat in such a way that we are not a stumbling block to the weak (1 Cor. 8:9). Here Paul appears to be arguing that it is not the food that harms, but idolatry.⁶⁵ "A central task of a theology of eating is to help us guard 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."⁶⁶ Yet the current focus of morning tea appears to be on the food itself. It is therefore wise to reflect upon why we make the decisions we do communally around food, considering their impact on others and whether they are indeed faithful to the biblical narrative, and hence how food honours and reconciles us to God and each other (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17).

⁵⁸ Harper, 76.

⁵⁹ Fickenscher, "Disordered Eating," 365.

⁶⁰ Ayres recognises the global food system is both broken and bound up in sin, and that we are often unwittingly contributors (*Good Food*, 158).

⁶¹ Braaten and Braaten, 43.

⁶² Wirzba, "Food for Theologians," 378.

⁶³ Huang, 24.

⁶⁴ van Houwelingen, "The Apostolic Decree," 40.

⁶⁵ Gooch, *Dangerous Food*, 86.

⁶⁶ Wirzba, *A Theology of Eating*, 11.

We were ultimately created to live in communion with God, one another and all of creation, with this communion characterised by a reverence for God (Gen. 9:2-4,8-10)⁶⁷ and life-giving relationships. Food becomes a vehicle for reconciliation when we move from being consumers to being in communion, from eating that harms and breaks partnership, to eating that fulfils and joins us together.

Food and the promise of restoration

I therefore finish this reflection with a picture of the communal eating to come, the wedding feast. The Great Feast of Isaiah 25 is clearly seen to link food and salvation, as does Jesus in the banquet of Luke 14:15-24.⁶⁸ This passage reminds us that the one who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God is the one who humbly accepts the invitation. The feast is offered freely to those who do not deserve it, who cannot repay. The feast reflects abundant blessings that can only come as a gift by being received as such. “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God” (v16), for they will know that Jesus is truly the life-sustaining “bread of life”. Food then truly plays its role of communion, not consumption, as it was always intended to do.

Identifying principles towards a practical theology around communal food consumption

I will now identify principles which can guide how our theology can be worked out in practice, constructing a new narrative for my church’s communal food practices. This will be done by reflecting upon areas of agreement and disagreement between varying perspectives, allowing for the establishment of common ground which can then wisely ground new practices. Secular and theological perspectives affirm food’s value in sustaining life. Food itself is necessary for living a physical life. Food can be enjoyable and even more so in the company of others. Food is valued. Yet whilst food is undoubtably material, it can be more than simply matter for consumption. The understanding of how this plays out is where these perspectives most differ. This brings us to the first principle.

Each discipline has its own way of representing food; for the nutritionist, food’s value is based upon its ability to supply necessary nutrients, whereas for the sociologist, it is valued for the way it brings people together in meaningful relationships. Yet, the biblical story embraces both, highlighting that *food is first and foremost a gift from God*, and provides a framework through which to view food.

⁶⁷ Groppe, *Eating and Drinking*, 53.

⁶⁸ Witherington notes that eating and drinking will characterise life in the future kingdom, “because meals are one of the main ways communion and koinonia happen and intimate relationships are built” (*The Rest of Life*, 86).

Unfortunately, the prevailing views of both the world and the church do not generally acknowledge food as a good gift of the Creator and worthy of our gratitude. Yet the very nature of food as a gift emphasises celebration, communion and gratitude, “ushering an awareness of “the holy” into everyday life.”⁶⁹ For whilst “not every meal is the Eucharist...every meal can be approached Eucharistically. That is to say, one can approach each daily meal with the same appreciation and reverence that he or she ought to approach the Lord’s Supper.”⁷⁰ A biblical perception of food as a gift has implications upon not only our attitudes and beliefs, but upon the choices we make around food. Hence the way we approach food needs to be brought into alignment with a biblical worldview (60). This leads directly into the second principle.

We have seen that the view taken of the physical body will impact the role that body will play. Decisions around food are then seen as an outplaying of that understood role, whether implicitly or explicitly. The Gnostics believed in the supremacy of the soul over the physical body, often depriving the body of food, whereas those who identify the body as a machine, focus on food solely as fuel. The biblical story reveals the body as valued by God, and food as a purposeful gift for that very body. We therefore must *approach food in a way which honours both Creator and created*. A gift is best understood within the context of both the one who gives and the intended receiver. If we understand food as a gift, then this must have theological implications for our understanding of the physical body. This in turn will impact the choices we make around food, so that they are consistent with this faithful understanding of the body as the receiver of God’s good gift.

Other disciplines support the nurture of the body and hence have the potential to offer valuable insights. There is a growing awareness of food and its impact upon wellbeing. Where the divide occurs is that contemporary culture honours the body for the body’s sake, whereas a biblical approach sees the body as in need of care because of who it was created by and for. Care needs to be taken in making sure that it is the Creator, not created, that we worship. It is one thing to worship the body for self-fulfilling reasons, but another “to offer one’s body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom. 12:1). Caring for our bodies honours our maker by demonstrating good stewardship of what we have been given (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Wise communal eating reflects a faithful response to God as our Creator, and to our bodies, but also to the bodies of others, as His creations. We do not live in a vacuum. Our food choices impact others. Which brings us to our third principle.

⁶⁹ Schut, *Food and Faith*, 13.

⁷⁰ Huang, 53.

Whilst many endeavour to live independently of God and others, the biblical story is one of interdependence. We are to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matt. 22:39), being attentive to the physical needs of others (Luke 19:25-37). We are not to harm others by the choices we make.⁷¹ *We are responsible to each other in our communal food practices.* The very nature of food as a gift makes it not just a gift for the individual, but for each one who receives it. Food is not simply a private matter: individual choice is not sovereign.⁷²

Current statistics for both diabetes and obesity demonstrate links between these illnesses and choices around food consumption, highlighting our responsibility to each other. Yet the origin of this responsibility differs between secular and theological perspectives. Biblically our responsibility originates in our understanding of food as God's gift, for God's creations, for His good purposes. Hence collectively as God's people, we live out this reality by demonstrating to the world our gratitude for and understanding of God's provision for us. This means that what we consume and in what quantities does matter.

Whilst secular understandings can highlight shared responsibilities around food consumption, they are limited by motivations which often deny God. They tend to focus solely on ethical rationale. Yet ethical decision making only goes part of the way. As God's people, and Christ's ambassadors in the world, our responsibility to each other can be demonstrated through being informed and responsible in our eating,⁷³ and intentionally thinking of the needs of others.⁷⁴ Not only do our choices affect others, but the environment in which we live can influence how successfully we live out a new narrative. This brings us to the fourth principle.

Sociologists demonstrate that behaviour change is less likely to occur without supportive environments conducive to change. The biblical story reveals how early leaders encouraged and supported the young churches, revealing their love, and joy in sharing a common goal in the furtherance of the gospel.⁷⁵ *If we care for others, then we will want others to thrive and flourish for the sake of the gospel, by providing supportive environments.*

"Supportive environments and communities are fundamental in shaping people's choices."⁷⁶ Whilst individuals are responsible for their own behaviour, change is difficult

⁷¹ Wirzba reminds us that ethical issues are present in respect to eating as ethics speaks to the way we actually live in the world (*A Theology of Eating*, xv).

⁷² Grumett and Muers, *Theology on the Menu*, 128.

⁷³ Berry, "The Pleasures of Eating," 152.

⁷⁴ McMinn, *To the Table*, 25.

⁷⁵ Philippians 1:3-6 provides such an example.

⁷⁶ World Health Organisation, "[Obesity and Overweight](#)."

“unless the environment makes the behaviour feasible.”⁷⁷ Here we can learn from social studies which show direct correlations between supportive environments and healthier choices. Culturally we are seeing an influx of programs designed to support the health of individuals within their communities. Our church context needs to support both the physical and spiritual wellbeing of its members.

However, the predominant worldview also has the potential to shape how our understanding of both food and body plays out. Cultural norms may impact our practices. The biblical story is clear though, we are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2a). The Israelites needed to become dependent on the Lord to guide them amidst other influences. We too need to be attentive “to the ways in which the habits, practices and rhythms of our bodies are shaped by the world in which we live.”⁷⁸ We are to guard against embracing false understandings of reality by determining which practices and beliefs are faithful to Scripture and which are culture driven (44). *The role food plays in our communal gatherings must reflect the biblical mandate rather than the secular one.*

We can no longer treat food as a commodity. The aim of morning tea is not to provide the most pleasurable food for maximum enjoyment, whilst not denying food can be enjoyable, but rather presenting food in such a way that appreciates food as a gift from our Creator, for our nourishment, joy and delight in Him as we share together. The gift giver is acknowledged and exalted in our eating practices, rather than the food. This leads us to our next principle.

We serve the Lord and His interests first. Yet, we need to serve Him alone. Our practices will reveal our true allegiance. Just as Adam and Eve, and the wandering Israelites placed their own preferences before God’s provision, so too can the choices we make reveal where our trust lies. The biblical story demonstrates that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also (Luke 12:34). *We must guard against making food itself an idol.*

Unfortunately, most who approach the study of food do so from an idolatrous mindset, although they may not see it that way. Rather than seeing food through its relationship with its Creator, they see food as a means to an end. For the nutritionist, food’s value is based on its ability to provide particular nutrients. Whilst in the church, food is often utilised as a resource to encourage greater participation and itself can become the focus. It is meaningful to ask

⁷⁷ Healey, “Overweight and Obesity,” 18.

⁷⁸ Anderson, 44.

whether our current practice embodies Kingdom concerns or whether it is a distraction or obstacle to what He desires for the world?⁷⁹

Rising levels of obesity demonstrate that a significant number of people struggle with food and God's intention for it.⁸⁰ "Food has become an idol of sorts. Whether through gluttony or a hyper-nutritionalized view of food, few churches seem to address these issues as fundamentally idolatrous" (52). I have observed a fear that a focus upon what is eaten is worldly and idolises either health or fitness. However, if we have a biblical view, food will not become the focus, for our true allegiance belongs to the Creator, and to celebrating and pleasing Him.

Lastly, we understand that food is intended to be shared, and the very act of sharing together is part of its intended purpose. Shared experiences around food are significant. "Studies that show links between eating together and well-being are telling us something important, even if a theologically grounded purpose for eating together is missing."⁸¹ We were designed to live in community, to share our lives together, and eating is one of the most basic ways in which we do that. The biblical story reveals God's design for us to live in communion with Him and others, and food throughout the Old and New Testaments was often at the centre of such times. Most significantly we can see the sharing of food together as a way in which to remember God's blessings to us, beautifully portrayed in the Last Supper and the Feast to come. *Sharing food together is a vehicle for remembering and rejoicing in God's ultimate gift of salvation.*

Resulting proposals for Church ministry practice

In light of the previous reflections and principles, I will now propose communal practices around food which I believe will be more faithful to a biblical narrative of food.⁸² These "practices" are proposed with the intention of developing new communal values and aspirations.⁸³ The practices are intentional, attentive and grateful.⁸⁴ I have chosen a variety of approaches to facilitate change⁸⁵ and appreciate that political differences will at times arise due to differing social priorities.⁸⁶ Yet, I recognise that by desiring God's will, not our own, we imply that we are willing to put aside our own priorities, and together, work through how our practices can be faithful to our renewed theology.

⁷⁹ Cooper-White and Cooper-White, *Exploring Practices of Ministry*, 13.

⁸⁰ Huang, 51.

⁸¹ McMinn, 21.

⁸² I recognise that the merits of fasting have not been explored here.

⁸³ Cooper-White and Cooper-White, 13.

⁸⁴ McMinn, 25.

⁸⁵ Francis offers fifty-seven practical suggestions for changing the way food is used (*What in God's Name*, 115-141).

⁸⁶ Joseph and Nestle, "Food and Politics," 87.

I acknowledge that “transformation is a shift in beliefs and an alternative narrative that follows those beliefs.”⁸⁷ As such, these practices begin by addressing the biblical belief concerning food and hence a narrative which mirrors those beliefs, followed by communal disciplines that affirm this biblical narrative. In so doing, the influences of the consumer narrative are challenged, and the old ways of being will begin to lose their dominance (47). I present the following “practices” as a way forward:

1. We recognise food as a gift from God and celebration of His goodness, rather than a product to be consumed. This will occur through direct teaching and personal stories—from the pulpit, within small groups, and at special occasions where food is served.⁸⁸ We utilise Jung’s “*Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment*” for group study.
2. We reflect and pray before morning tea. This acknowledges our provider and that food comes to us as a gift from Him, to be shared and enjoyed together, pointing to His ultimate provision for us in the “bread of life.” This glorifies God and reorients food “so that it reflects God’s purpose for it.”⁸⁹
3. We examine how our renewed understanding of food unfolds in respect to both our church mission and vision statements.
4. We develop guidelines around the provision of food within our ministries which will encourage us to be more mindful of our regular choices: considering how our communal choices can glorify God, encourage healthy eating habits in others, and value our God-given bodies.
5. We deliberately remind people of the connections between food and God’s blessing. We engage the services of a local farmer to speak about their dependence upon God, the seasons and weather, for the food supply. We reflect upon food practices in the early church by annually recreating what a feast might have looked like in biblical times.⁹⁰ We utilise Capon’s “*The Supper of the Lamb*” in our hospitality team as we reflect upon, prepare and enjoy communal food.
6. We encourage people to prepare their own food, to know where their food is coming from, and to share their own produce with others⁹¹ by setting up a recipe exchange, list of local providers, and surplus food table.⁹²

⁸⁷ Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight, 44.

⁸⁸ Brownell and Horgen suggest that certain conditions must exist for change to occur: a crisis of sorts, evidence, victims, emotion and social attitude change, leaders willing to resist external influences, and a perceived need to protect children (*Food Fight*, 284-290).

⁸⁹ Huang, 52.

⁹⁰ Neel and Pugh’s *Food and Feasts* provides helpful ideas and recipes for such a recreation. They also suggest that we have lost much thankfulness for God’s blessing through food as “there is a disconnect between most modern people and their food,” (53) a disconnection that wasn’t however present in the early church.

⁹¹ Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating.”

⁹² A mother, who having been diagnosed with cancer sought assistance from others in her church and community by requesting the sharing of any surplus organic produce, demonstrated how food was God’s provision and blessing to her, but also that it was blessing shared.

7. We endeavour to make ethical decisions as a church concerning food by promoting and utilising websites which provide lists of ethical companies.⁹³
8. We recognize that our church environment can play a significant role in enabling or disabling wise decisions around food and will therefore consider ways in which we can care for and invest in each other's lives. Examples include placing limits on the amount of food provided and our choices around food rewards.⁹⁴
9. We become inclusive by catering for specific dietary needs. We can do this by undertaking a survey of such needs and making every effort to understand and accommodate individual needs.⁹⁵ In respect to the Lord's Supper, we will take care that the signs of our communal eating together are not weakened by multiple elements or ways of partaking.⁹⁶ For instance, through the provision of a communal bread which everyone can eat, demonstrating an inclusive unity.⁹⁷

These "practices" acknowledge that embracing a new way of being together around food not only embraces a new vision for communal food consumption, but renewed obligations to God and each other. Ways of understanding our need and desire for food which are no longer defined by a consumer culture. I accept that cultural change can be challenging. It is however my hope that as we reflect upon food as a gift from God, the provider of all our needs, we will progressively incorporate these new practices into our ways of sharing food together in order to honour Him and each other, and His provision of food to us as His good gift.

Conclusion

This article has explored the practices and theology around food within my local church and reflected upon their relevance and consistency with Scripture. It has done so by reflecting upon the current situation, acknowledging historical, cultural and theological contributing factors, undertaking theological reflection, and proposing principles which demonstrate aspects of synergy with other disciplines. Finally, it sets forth practices which reflect a more faithful communal food story. Whilst the practices my church put into place to share food together were intended to be both relational and missional, I note that the practice appeared more faithful than the underlying theology. For although the resulting fellowship enabled opportunities to share Christ, the food was not identified as a gift pointing to communion with Jesus, but rather as a commodity. This article has demonstrated that the mindful consumption of food in communal settings does have theological relevance. It is important to not only

⁹³ Singer and Mason, *Ethics*, 256.

⁹⁴ Brownell and Horgen, 309-312.

⁹⁵ For example, when gluten free alternatives are provided for those who are unable to consume gluten, they can participate in morning tea, be acknowledged as a valued part of the community, and be able to focus not on the food, but instead on the gift.

⁹⁶ Fickenscher, 365.

⁹⁷ Harper, 80.

understand the purposeful biblical intention for food as a gift and celebration of the goodness of God, but also ways in which this intention is being distorted by our prevailing culture. In so doing, it has highlighted that as God's chosen people we need to look with different eyes, eyes that see food as more than a commodity to meet our needs. As we see food as a gift from God, we are reminded of Him and our greater need for the One who offers us something even more sustaining in the "bread of life." We remember Him as we share food together.

About the Author

Tina Tebbutt has a BSc from Sydney University, BTh and MA(Min) from Sydney Missionary and Bible College. She is a wife and mother of two beautiful young boys. She is passionate about encouraging others to reflect upon food as a wonderful gift from our wise and loving God.

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