

Sustaining Abundant Life

Eating Well in the Household of God

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“Sustaining Abundant Life”

Stewardship in the household of God

Andrew Walton (Captain)

Australia Territory

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Introduction

The contemporary, Western diet is not sustainable. A diet high in meat and dairy, it is the diet of empire, resulting in untold and unnecessary harm for the environment, humanity and other animals, both now and into the future.

A healthy, plant-based diet,¹ on the other hand, offers a sacramental, selfless way of living in solidarity with the poor and in increased harmony with creation. This contributes to a culture of care that results in better individual health and environmental outcomes, as well as significantly less suffering and death for most sentient life.

This paper outlines my concerns related to the socially constructed eating habits of the West, before presenting an argument for a healthy, plant-based diet as being the diet most congruent with Salvationist values and faith.

Getting to Now

Have you ever stopped to consider who or what shapes the way you see the world? Factors such as when and where you were born; your family's worldview, the socio-economic strata you inhabit, level of education, religious affiliations, and so on?

In *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari claims,

“...every person is born into a pre-existing imagined order, and his or her desires are shaped from birth by its dominant myths.”²

I think this is true, even to the point that if everyone around you is doing something unusual, harmful or even outright dangerous, it can appear normal to you.³

¹ For helpful commentary on what a ‘healthy, plant-based diet’ means see “Vegan, Plant-based, or... What Label Works,” NutritionStudies.org, accessed 21 August, 2018, <https://nutritionstudies.org/vegan-plant-based-diet-or-what-label-works/>

² Yuval Noah Harari, “*Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*”, Audible.com, 2015) Ch.6, 39:58 (Audiobook)

³ Consider, for example, such things as the Running of the Bulls, driving without seatbelts, riding a bike without a helmet, and cigarette smoking - things all considered ‘normal’ in certain ages and cultures, despite what appear to be obvious risks.

As well-known theologian John Hick notes, with some insight and humour:

Whilst theologians have been very good at taking account of all sorts of abstruse or obscure data they have sometimes failed to notice quite obvious facts, which are evident to ordinary people. And one of the things that are obvious to ordinary people, and yet sometimes not regarded by the theologians, is this: that in the great majority of cases – say, 98% or 99% of cases – the religion in which a person believes and to which he or she adheres depends upon where that person was born.⁴

The same can be claimed for a great many things, including how we eat.

If you were born in Australia or New Zealand, it would not be uncommon for you and your family to consume a fair bit of unhealthy food. Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that our typically unhealthy Western diet – a diet high in meat and dairy, salt, sugar, saturated and trans-fats, and processed foods – is making us sick, shortening our lifespans and causing various other collective harms. Therefore, to consider what it means to *sustain abundant life and eat well in the household of God* seems timely.

An Abundant Life

So, what does an abundant life look like, when it comes to what we eat? I think the answers to this question is inseparably bound with another question: 'An abundant life for whom?'

In the face of debilitating global poverty, an abundance oriented toward the already abundant seems perverse. Could a Christian diet of abundance ever be a diet of excessive consumption at the expense of the global poor? Yet, for too long, Western society has equated abundance with excessive consumption. And the church, for the most part, has uncritically accepted this paradigm, with insufficient theological reflection or social critique. What we produce, purchase and consume has far reaching, albeit far from obvious, consequences.

⁴ John Hick, *"The Second Christianity"* (Xpress Reprints: London, 1983) 78.

The Diet of Empire

I see the destructive nature of poor Western eating habits, at their worst, as being in direct conflict with the values of the Kingdom of God, and more closely aligned with the values of many evil empires throughout the ages, than those of Jesus of Nazareth. With our diets as divorced from our values as they are from the front-line suffering and carnage they cause, now is the time to better understand our predicament and explore a healthy way forward.

A Socially Constructed Diet

How have we come to see such a destructive diet as normal? 'Big Food' corporations represent some of the new empires of our day, executing their plans with cruel and calculated precision to make a quick dollar, seldom with any sense of conscience or care for others. Spending billions of dollars to shape our purchasing patterns, we would be naive to think our choices are not heavily informed by such powers. This thinking is then reinforced within our social groups, with the new 'normal' becoming not only socially acceptable, but stigmatising healthy alternatives as 'abnormal.'

With the Australian government showing little to no leadership in providing education or regulation of unhealthy food, and in the face of poor corporate responsibility for how we eat, currently, learning how to eat well essentially remains the responsibility of the individual or family.

To say something is socially constructed is to identify that we, as humans, have made it this way; and that it could be otherwise. In the case of a Christian response to diet, we would do well to consider what role the church plays in critiquing poor eating.

Acknowledging robust, peer-reviewed findings on the negative impacts of a Western diet,⁵ it would be hard to argue there is not considerable scope to champion a healthier alternative.

⁵ See *The China Study: The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted*, by T. Colin Campbell (2005) for an excellent overview of the health issues, findings and responses discussed in this paper.

As Salvationists who have committed to “abstain from alcoholic drink, tobacco, and the non-medical use of addictive drugs...”⁶ it would be nice to think we have some sort of precedent to tackle this issue with wisdom, experience and grace. To eat well in the household of God is both a discipleship issue and a leadership issue that is not disconnected from our scripture, nor from the common theology of hope and love held by Salvationists around the world.

Harm to Individual Health

So, by now, you might be wondering, ‘Just how unhealthy is *unhealthy food*?’

Well, in an age where sugar kills more people than gunpowder⁷ and type 2 diabetes proves more debilitating than natural disasters;⁸ there’s not a lot of good news.

According to the CSIRO, four out of five Australians fail to reach their daily recommended intake of fruit and vegetables, due largely to an over-reliance on meat as a dietary staple.⁹ This is one of the major contributor to Australia’s high rates of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

Furthermore, the link between meat and cancer can no longer be denied, with the World Health Organisation classifying processed meat as a known carcinogen and red meat more generally as having a ‘likely’ link to cancer.^{10 11}

⁶ “Articles of War,” The Salvation Army, accessed 14 June, 2018, <https://www.sarmy.org.au/en/Resources/Articles-of-War/>

⁷ Yuval Noah Harari, “Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow”, Audible.com, 2015) Ch.1, 32:52 (Audiobook)

⁸ “Number of deaths from natural disaster events globally from 2000 to 2017” Statista, Accessed 2 May 2018, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/510952/number-of-deaths-from-natural-disasters-globally/>,

Yuval Noah Harari, “Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow”, Audible.com, 2015) Ch.1, 32:52 (Audiobook)

⁹ “Report warns Australian diets lacking in fruit and vegetables,” CSIRO, accessed 10 June, 2018, <https://www.csiro.au/en/News/News-releases/2017/Diets-Lacking-in-Fruit-and-Vegetables>

¹⁰ “Q&A on the carcinogenicity of the consumption of red meat and processed meat”, World Health Organisation, accessed 12 April, 2018, <http://www.who.int/features/qa/cancer-red-meat/en/>

¹¹ An acknowledgement to Matt Atkins who partnered with me on an ‘Eat Less Meat’ presentation for a Deakin University assignment, and did a lot of this research

A healthy plant-based diet, on the other hand, is known to reduce your odds of heart disease, heart failure,¹² stroke, coronary artery disease, hypertension,¹³ (high blood pressure),¹⁴ diabetes, obesity, and various cancers.¹⁵ Simultaneously, it increases the likelihood of you being leaner,¹⁶ more active,¹⁷ and having a better immune system.¹⁸

Harm to Social Welfare

Beyond the health benefits of a healthy plant-based diet for individuals are massive social benefits for others. In the short time it takes to read this paper, over fifty children will die of hunger. That amounts to 3.1 million child deaths per year due to malnutrition.¹⁹ In contrast, approximately 3 million people die from obesity every year.

Now hold these ghastly figures with the findings of a Cornell University study, which discovered the USA alone could sustain 800 million people each year with the grain currently fed to animals.²⁰ The rest of the world could easily cover the remaining 2.2 million malnourished children. The reality is, no one needs to die from hunger or malnutrition. But what is currently happening is that the rich are effectively eating the poor's grain, getting sickly fat while the poor starve to death. Not exactly 'sustaining abundant life,' or Kingdom of God behaviour.

12 "The right plant-based diet for you" Harvard Health Publishing, accessed 23 April 2018, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/the-right-plant-based-diet-for-you>

13 "Vegetarian and vegan eating," Better Health Network, accessed 15 June, 2018, <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/vegetarian-and-vegan-eating>

14 "Plant-Based Diets," NutritionalFacts.org, accessed 27 April 2018, <https://nutritionfacts.org/topics/plant-based-diets/>,

15 "Foods for Cancer Prevention," Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, accessed 19 April 2018, <https://www.pcrm.org/health/health-topics/foods-for-cancer-prevention>

16 "Becoming a Vegetarian", Harvard Health Publishing, accessed 11 June 2018, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/becoming-a-vegetarian>

17 "The right plant-based diet for you" Harvard Health Publishing, accessed 23 April 2018, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/the-right-plant-based-diet-for-you>

18 "Foods for Cancer Prevention," Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, accessed 19 April 2018, <https://www.pcrm.org/health/health-topics/foods-for-cancer-prevention>

19 "WHO Hunger Stats," United Nations Information Centre Canberra, accessed 26 May 2018, <http://un.org.au/2014/05/14/who-hunger-statistics/>

20 "U.S. could feed 800 million people with grain that livestock eat, Cornell ecologist advises animal scientists" Cornell Chronicle, accessed 2 October 2017, <http://news.cornell.edu/stories/1997/08/us-could-feed-800-million-people-grain-livestock-eat>

It obviously doesn't take a nutritionists, mathematician or world-class ethicist to join the dots - as a planet; as a society, and as a church, we are not sustaining abundant life or eating well in the household of God. We are practicing the inequity condemned wholesale in our scriptures, often doing it in the name of Jesus.

Harm to Animal Welfare

In addition to the human suffering and death outlined above, we inflict mass-suffering and death on animals.

A bit of chicken here and a burger there currently adds up to 59 million tonnes of beef consumed globally each year;²¹ around 100 million tonnes of chicken;²² and 118 million tonnes of pork.²³ Global meat consumption is forecast to double by 2050.²⁴

As you know, meat is typically served up ready to eat, or packaged and put forward as a sanitised product, wrapped in plastic, which is purchased alongside any other product you would buy at the supermarket. It does not scream in agony, nor shiver in terror at the sight, sound and smell of death all around it. It conveys nothing of the social suffering it has endured, separated from family. It is just one more thing in the trolley we like the taste of.

Any sense of God-createdness; of something entrusted to our care; something beautiful, with desires, feelings or needs of its own, has been long stripped from it, for the pleasure of our palate. Unlike our pets, subjective wants and wellbeing are subjugated, as it is used as an object for our enjoyment.

²¹ "Global Meat Production and Consumption Continue to Rise," WorldWatch Institute, accessed 6 April 2018, <http://www.worldwatch.org/global-meat-production-and-consumption-continue-rise>

²² "GLOBAL POULTRY TRENDS - Chicken Meat Output to Exceed 100 Million Tonnes," The Poultry Site, accessed 4 October, 2017, <http://www.thepoultrysite.com/articles/3586/global-poultry-trends-chicken-meat-output-to-exceed-100-million-tonnes/>

²³ "Net pork production worldwide by country," Statista, accessed 4 October 2017, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273232/net-pork-production-worldwide-by-country/>

²⁴ "Meat and meat products," Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, accessed 22 August, 2018, <http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/themes/en/meat/home.html>

This is a system I want nothing to do with!

Despite the widespread and systemic cruelty inflicted upon agricultural animals – a cruelty I doubt most would tolerate if they were not so removed from its horrors, or inseparably bound to its benefits through meat and dairy consumption – the industry storms on, slaughtering intelligent, sentient, social, helpless creatures by the billions every month. If these animals could understand what Christian stewardship towards creation was, I wonder what on earth they would make of it!

A Christian meta-ethic of love, compassion and mercy seldom fulfils its anthropocentric ideal, let alone extend to all of creation.

It is as sad as it is interesting to see how the theologically-focussed agricultural enterprise of sacrificial Judaism was, for Christians, superseded by Christ's sacrificial atonement, only to be setup again, minus the theological overlay.

The truth is, we love our meat, and we're in no hurry to give it up.

Harm to Environmental Health

There is a further collective price to pay for our poor eating choices too.

The production and consumption of meat is the biggest single contributor of greenhouse gas emissions and thus global warming,²⁵ causing widespread environmental devastation,²⁶ including a dramatic loss in global biodiversity.²⁷

²⁵ "Livestock a major threat to environment," Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, accessed 12 October 2017, <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000448/index.html>

²⁶ "Ecological Footprint Calculator," FootprintCalculator.org, accessed 4 October, 2017, <https://www.footprintcalculator.org/>, <http://www.fao.org/gleam/results/en/>, "Livestock – Climate Change's Forgotten Sector Global Public Opinion on Meat and Dairy Consumption," Chatham House, accessed 4 October, 2017, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20141203LivestockClimateChangeForgottenSectorBaileyFroggattWellesleyFinal.pdf

²⁷ "Climate Change is Becoming a Top Threat to Biodiversity," Scientific American, accessed 22 August, 2018, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/climate-change-is-becoming-a-top-threat-to-biodiversity/>

An ecological footprint calculator will quickly reveal that dietary change represents the single biggest difference most people can make to reduce their ecological footprint, noting a vegan footprint is approximately half that of the average meat-eater.²⁸

This is because meat production uses 10 times more water and 20 times more land to produce its vegetable equivalent.²⁹ All told, according to Robert Goodland and Jeff Anhang, co-authors of *Livestock and Climate Change*, the practice of raising animals to eat has been calculated at possibly up to half of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions.³⁰

This, when coupled with the mass-deforestation required to graze cattle, compounds the issue of global warming. The World Bank has estimated a staggering 91% of the Amazon, often referred to as *the lungs of the world*, has been cut down for agriculture alone.³¹

According to The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Australians eat nearly 3 times as much meat as the worldwide average, ranking 4th in the world for per capita for meat consumption. New Zealand is ranked 10th.³² With Australia having the 6th highest overall ecological footprint in the world – 3 times the global average³³ – I would argue Australia, in particular, has a moral obligation to exercise some regional leadership concerning responsible global citizenship.

²⁸ "Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions Data," United States Environmental Protection Agency, accessed 14 July 2018, <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/global-greenhouse-gas-emissions-data>

²⁹ "Meat and the Environment," PETA, accessed 6 October 2017, <https://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/meat-environment/>

³⁰ "Livestock and Climate Change," WorldWatch Institute, accessed 2 October 2017, <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/6294>

³¹ "Causes of Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon," World Bank, accessed 7 October 2017, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/758171468768828889/pdf/277150PAPER0wbwp0no1022.pdf>

³² "Meat Consumption," OECD, accessed 3 October, 2017, <https://data.oecd.org/agroutput/meat-consumption.htm>

³³ "Australia's Ecological Footprint," Environmental Protection Agency Victoria, accessed 3 October, 2017, <http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/~media/Publications/1066.pdf>

What Does Eating Well Look Like?

It is evident there are many benefits for individuals, communities, animals and the environment in eating well in the household of God.

There is near unanimous consensus³⁴ that diets high in fruit and vegetables promote good health, with legumes, nuts and seeds being part of that equation. Eating wholegrains, along with drinking plenty of water, round out a basic picture of what a healthy plant-based diet looks like.

Most people at least have a basic understanding that food or drink high in sugar, salt, saturated and trans-fats (whether they eat these foods or not) is not good for you. The increased health risk of eating meat and dairy products is not so well known. Unfortunately, this 'knowledge gap' combined with a 'will gap' reinforces the status quo, making positive change very slow.

Constructing Tomorrow

So where to from here? Well, firstly, look after yourself and those you love, because, most likely, no one else will.

Research broadly and think deeply about the impact of your food choices, and do your best to ensure your values and faith are reflected in what you eat - not just your taste preferences. And think about the world your food choices re-create; does the food you're purchasing and consuming construct the world you want for future generations?

Additionally, make time to advocate for justice with governments, corporations, churches, family and friends, whilst encouraging like-minded people who are living out of their convictions. And be persistent in prayer.

³⁴ Again, see *The China Study: The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted*, by T. Colin Campbell (2005).

Remain mindful that as much as we are a product of our world, the world of tomorrow will be the product of the individual and collective choices we make today. We have agency, and a responsibility to use it for the glory of the Kingdom of God.

Aim to live your life in a way that when you look back on it, you will have no regrets.

Conclusion

When I lived in Geelong, my Brazilian Jui Jitsu teacher, John Will, once ask, “How do you get out of a poor situation?” answering his own question by suggesting we do it “One step at a time.”³⁵

Adopting a healthy plant-based diet can be as simple as a shift towards more frequent healthy food choices each day.³⁶ No one need feel stuck, blamed, guilty or unable to improve in what they eat. At the risk of endorsing an unethical multi-national corporation, you can ‘Just Do It!’³⁷

An authentic, congruent spirituality that permeates all areas of life makes for a fulfilling, peaceable way to *be* in a broken world, and provides a rewarding way of connecting with creation and Creator.

For me, vegetarianism, and now veganism, has been one-part culinary adventure, two-parts spiritual pilgrimage. It is part of a larger effort to live a more sustainable lifestyle, which reflects a life oriented towards God’s Kingdom. I would whole-heartedly and unreservedly commend a healthy plant-based diet to anyone wanting to eat and live well, knowing I have gained more than I have lost in doing so.

³⁵ John Will, 2009, Black Belt Studios, Geelong

³⁶ It can also be as wonderfully sudden as a decisive commitment to make a major change – I think each individual/family must discern the best path for them.

³⁷ Nike.com. Please consult a health professional before making any big dietary changes. And enjoy the journey of learning more about what eating well looks like.

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