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Newall, M. orcid.org/0000-0003-3616-7702 (Cover date: January-February 2024) 'Faith working through love': a new food law for a new world. *Theology*, 127 (1). pp. 22-29. ISSN 0040-571X

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X231218431>

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Faith working through love': a new food law for a new world

Theology
0(0) 1–8

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that in regard to dietary choices, the New Testament, while moving beyond the ritual purity found in the Mosaic dispensation, does not replace it with a libertarian freedom – a kind of antinomian indifference – or even a harsh asceticism, but with what the Apostle Paul calls ‘faith working through love’ (Gal. 5.6). The faith talked of is based on the death and resurrection of Christ and hopes in his coming. Moreover, this faith is inserted within the framework of the initial Genesis ideal of peace and the entire story of Israel, as well as the expectation for the final renewal of the cosmos beyond sin and death (Isa. 11.6–9; Matt. 19.28; Rom. 8.19–21).

Keywords

animals, Bible, Christianity, food, Jesus, plant-based, vegan

A new teaching

Various forms of Christianity have often relegated one’s food choices to the realm of indifference (*adiaphora*);¹ this has typically been the result of an erroneous understanding of Jesus’ parable on food (Mark 7.17; Matt. 15.15) or other passages of Scripture, but is also the fruit of a long history within the Church. On the other hand, the Apostle Paul underlines sharply that eating that does not derive from faith is sinful (Rom 14.23).² Interestingly, Paul is the only Apostle to substantially expand upon, and clarify, Jesus’ parable regarding food, that ‘[n]othing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out

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of a person that defiles them,’ as ‘it is from within, out of a person’s heart’ that evil comes (Mark 7.15, 7.21a; see Mark 7.1–23; Matt. 15.1–20).³ Paul formulated this teaching within the framework of the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, which forms the background of his discussion in Romans 14 and in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. While the problem of meat sacrificed to idols is distant from Western culture, it serves as a case study in which the Apostle underlines various universal principles that are valid even today. In the context of these chapters, one can note quite clearly that Paul is applying the two great commandments of Christ – loving God wholeheartedly and one’s neighbour (Matt. 22.36–40) – to food choices. For this reason, in Romans 14, the Apostle first highlights the need to honour God in regard to food (Rom. 14.6–8), and then to seek the good of one’s brother in Christ and what he terms ‘walking in love’ (Rom. 14.15). Paul repeats this teaching in his first letter to the Corinthians, in which he again underlines the centrality of love for one’s brother and neighbour (1 Cor. 8.1–2, 9–13) – ‘Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor’ (1 Cor. 10.24) – and then, more importantly, the necessity of giving glory to God: ‘So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God’ (1 Cor. 10.31). Furthermore, far from concluding that his food choices are indifferent, the Apostle ends his discussion in 1 Corinthians 8 with his declaration that he would never eat meat again if this was what love required (8.13; see Rom. 14.21). It is interesting that Paul does not use the Greek for idol food, *eidólouthutos*, which he had used during the chapter; instead, he utilizes the specific Greek word for animal flesh, *kreas*.

In these passages of Scripture, we see how Paul understood Jesus’ words not as freedom to do as one pleases (Gal. 5.13), a kind of liberation from ethics, but rather as a radical call to live a life of hope and love based on faith in Christ (Gal. 2.20) and expectation in the coming kingdom of God (2 Tim. 4.1). In this sense, the Apostle summarizes the general basis of Christian ethics as ‘faith expressing itself through love’ (Gal. 5.6; see Gal. 5.13). This love issuing from the heart and based on faith in Christ’s resurrection, in turn, produces ‘righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 14.17). When Paul expands on this teaching in his letter to the Galatians, he links it to a denial of the ‘acts of the flesh’ (Gal. 5.19–21) and a life of holiness through following the Holy Spirit: ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’ (Gal. 5.22–23; see Rom. 6.11–21).

Gnostic antinomianism

As Christianity spread across the Mediterranean, it encountered three main teachings that were seen as errors concerning food. The first, and perhaps most obvious, was legalism, which originated from those who believed that Christians were still under the Mosaic dispensation, together with its requirements in terms of holy festivals and circumcision and its general conception of ritual purity. The New Testament taught a new paradigm that went beyond the previous ideas of ritually clean and unclean – and also the rites of the Old Covenant – and placed radical

love at the centre of God's law (1 Cor. 13.1–13). This is underlined in Acts 10 and in the entire book of Galatians, where we are shown how the Gentiles had been accepted into the Church (see Col. 2.1–17). While this form of legalism tended to stem primarily from the Jewish culture from which Christianity sprung, as the gospel began to expand out into the Roman empire, and into Greco-Roman culture more generally, it encountered new dangers arising from the dualistic spirituality that would be termed 'Proto-Gnosticism'.

Much has been said of Gnosticism and its earlier forms, such as proto-Gnosticism, with some scholars even denying the existence of this religious category altogether. This is in part derived from the fact that a lot of what we know about the Gnostics, and similar groups, comes from their enemies, such as Plotinus (*Ennead* II.9) and, more importantly, the early Church fathers and their incendiary polemics against them (*Adversus Marcionem*; *Adversus Haereses*; *Contra Manichaeos*). At the same time, discoveries in the twentieth century – especially the Nag Hammadi scrolls, which included apocryphal Gospels – have given credence to the existence of a series of loosely related groups that had a similar worldview. From what we know, for the Gnostics, matter was evil and the creation of a demented demiurge that had trapped human beings in the physical world. The only hope of salvation for the Gnostics was the awakening of an inner divine spark that each human being possessed, and which could one day be released from the prison of the body and the world and return to the unknown God beyond this creation. At the foundation of Gnostic thought was a radical dualism between God and the world, and a corresponding division between humanity and creation. The God of Gnosticism was 'absolutely transmundane' and 'alien' to the cosmos, and the deity's distant and aloof realm of light was sharply contrasted with the darkness of matter and the cosmos, which it did not create.⁴ Moreover, many Gnostics considered themselves Christians but strongly denied the Incarnation (1 John 4.1–6), and they believed in a spiritual Christ who was a redeemer figure sent by the God beyond this world to awaken the elect and deliver them from this creation.⁵

Whereas antinomianism refers to lawlessness and unbridled indulgence, severe asceticism was its polar opposite and consisted in forms of semi-starvation and the harsh mortification of the body (1 Tim. 4.1–8; Col. 2.18–23). Ironically, these opposite errors often flowed from a similar Gnostic conception of the world and the body, even if they produced diametrically different groups of people. Gnosticism's denigration of the body and the material creation led to both an extreme libertinism, in that what was done in the body was indifferent to the inner spirit, and a harsh mortification that sought to detach the inner transcendent self from the material realm, as well as vexing the Creator of the physical world by despising his creation.⁶ This harsh asceticism went beyond just diet and nutrition and encompassed the whole of one's existence, including clothing, sleep, sensory pleasure and sexuality.⁷

In 1 Corinthians 6 and 8 (see also 10.23), we can see certain forms of antinomianism present in Paul's discussion with the members of this church.

In particular, many of the Corinthians' slogans, which Paul quotes and then strongly repudiates, emphasize a libertine attitude towards food, sexuality and the body, which the Apostle is forced to correct by underlining the importance of the resurrection and the need to honour God with one's body:

'I have the right to do anything,' you say – but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything' – but I will not be mastered by anything. You say, 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.' The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also . . .

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. (1 Cor. 6.12–13, 19–20)

Likewise, 1 Corinthians 8.8 most likely also contains a quotation refutation, in which Paul again quotes and then refutes the Corinthians' libertinism and self-centredness. From these verses, it can be seen how the Corinthians' deep misunderstanding of the significance of their embodied existence, and the resurrection more generally, was the source of what Paul saw as their errors (1 Cor. 15.12–14).

In light of the antinomianism of the Corinthians, it is interesting to briefly analyse the proto-Gnostic Gospel of Thomas (second–third century AD), an apocryphal Gospel that was discovered in the mid-twentieth century near Nag Hammadi in Egypt, which contains an essentially antinomian understanding of diet that resembles the slogans in Corinth.⁸ While the Gospel of Thomas records many teachings that have no relation to the canonical Gospels, a percentage of the material is similar to, or a modified version of, some of Jesus' authentic teachings.⁹ Overall, most of the Sayings are pervaded by a deep dualism (Saying 112) and secretive mysticism that disparages the material world and promotes esoteric wisdom. We are told at the outset in Saying 1: 'Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.' Likewise, the Gospel of Thomas is practically devoid of historical information, the Christ of Thomas's Gospel comes out of nowhere and there is no eschatological expectation, but the kingdom of God is already present in the world and is simply not perceived by the uninitiated masses (Saying 113). Jesus, likewise, is reduced to an esoteric sage with very little interest in this present world.¹⁰ Various sayings of Thomas's Jesus deal with food more generally (Sayings 6, 27 and 104), but, in particular, it is Saying 14 that brings to light deeply Gnostic attitudes. In Saying 14.4–5, brief snippets of words that resemble those of the historical Jesus – primarily a short summary of his parable on food – are presented, shorn of their greater context.¹¹ The heart holiness that Jesus underlined in his parable in Matthew and Mark has been replaced by antinomianism. Ultimately, the spirit cannot be defiled by the material and diet is indifferent to these enlightened Gnostics. History, the body and ethics recede into irrelevance in light of the special knowledge possessed by these initiates.¹²

Radical messianic hope

The early Church's battle against Gnosticism, and its early forms, quickly became a struggle for the very heart of the gospel message. Was Christianity simply another mystery religion promising an ethereal salvation for liberated spirits in heaven, and Jesus one of many enlightened beings sent from above? To this, the early Church answered by affirming that Jesus was not simply another emanation of God, a charismatic sage, or even a great teacher; rather, he was *the messianic* and dramatic inbreaking of God himself into human history (John 1.14, 14.9; Col. 1.15; Heb. 1.3). Likewise, the salvation the gospel offered was not that of the disincarnated soul, or the awakening of an inner spark within mankind, but nothing less than the divine miracle of the resurrection from the dead and the restoration, and renewal, of the entire physical cosmos.¹³ It is no mistake, then, that Docetism, the denial that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh, is viewed as the foundational heresy in the New Testament and is denounced with the strongest vehemence possible (1 John 4.1–3; 2 John 1.7; 1 Tim. 3.16–4.1; Col. 2.9).¹⁴ The basic hermeneutical principle of the early Church – to which the formation of the biblical canon powerfully testifies – was that there was an unbreakable continuity between the Old and New Testaments: the Creator-God is also the Saviour-God who has come to redeem and liberate his creation.¹⁵

Primitive Christianity understood that, in the life of Jesus, and in his death and resurrection, something supremely powerful and new had occurred: the messianic age had dawned. In particular, early Christians believed that Christ through his victory on the cross had overcome the forces of darkness, the 'principalities and powers' to which creation has been enslaved since the Fall, and which were ultimately behind oppression, violence and death in this present world (Eph. 6.12; Col. 2.15). In view of this radical inbreaking of God's kingdom into history, they began to live, and reorient, their lives in hope of Christ's future. Moreover, they saw Jesus of Nazareth not as the messenger of an unknown God, totally alien to creation, but as the fulfilment of the promises of the Hebrew Bible, and as organically inserted within the overarching story of salvation of the world (Acts 26.6, 24.14–15).

Both the Jewish Prophets and the Apostles believed that when God's kingdom came in its fullness death and violence would be abolished, and peace would reign between humanity and animals. God's ideal world, which had been prefigured in Genesis 1 and 2, would be restored: in the future age, the 'lion shall dwell with the lamb' (Isa. 11.6–9; Hos. 2.18), creation will be liberated from 'its bondage to decay' (Rom. 8.19–21), and death will be 'swallowed up in victory' (1 Cor. 15.54).¹⁶ In this ideal world, we see that humans were prescribed a plant-based diet and that their 'dominion' over God's creatures was a non-violent and benevolent rule that was to reflect God's kingship over humanity (Gen. 1.28–29; Matt. 19.8).¹⁷ In this regard, the Church can be seen as an anticipation of God's kingdom, which already begins to transform the present (Matt. 19.28).¹⁸ By proleptically bringing into the world,

even if in a fragmentary form, what has been promised in the future, Christians bear witness to Christ's resurrection, and the ultimate triumph of life over death.¹⁹

The issues facing the world, and the Church, today are manifold, complex and profound. These include world hunger, environmental destruction, animal cruelty, chronic disease, resource depletion, pandemics, antibiotic resistance and climate change, all of which require Christians to assess whether their food choices are honouring and loving God – and the creatures he cares for (Matt. 6.26, 10.29; Luke 12.6) – and whether they are loving towards their neighbours with whom they share this planet.²⁰ Followers of Christ in the twenty-first century live in a profoundly different time compared to their ancient forerunners, but they share the same hope for the future of God. Here, genuine faith consists not in an esoteric indifference to what is deemed the transitory and illusory nature of history, ethics, creation and the body, but rather in trust in the promise of the resurrection and in radical messianic hope for the final transfiguration of the world into the kingdom of God and his Christ (Acts 3.21; 2 Pet. 3.13; Rev. 11.15, 21.1–4).

Conclusions

In this short article, I have argued that the New Testament does, in fact, teach a 'food law', and that this consists in 'faith working through love' which issues from the heart and expresses 'righteousness'. This teaching is introduced by Christ in the Gospels in parabolic form and expanded upon primarily by the Apostle Paul. The faith discussed in this context is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus and the expectation of his coming (Gal. 2.20; 1 Cor. 11.26; Heb. 10.37; 1 Thess. 1.10). Furthermore, I briefly highlighted three of the main errors that the gospel encountered concerning food in the form of legalism, harsh asceticism and antinomianism. In particular, I attempted to show that this third error – the idea that Christians' food choices are indifferent – is more in line with the proto-Gnostic tendencies, and self-indulgence, which Paul fought against in Corinth, and with the dualistic teaching on food in the proto-Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, than with the genuine teaching of the New Testament. In conclusion, then, I have argued that the New Testament affirms that Christians' food choices should be an expression of true holiness – that is, of radical love for God, humanity and creation – and a sign of hope for the coming of God's kingdom on earth (Matt. 6.10).

Notes

1. For example, the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* (1530), article 26; see *Adversus Jovinianum* 1.1, 1.18, 2.10–11, 2.15–17 and 2.37–38.
2. '[B]ecause their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin' (Rom. 14.23b).

3. Jesus' teaching on food highlights heart holiness as opposed to ritual purity, or anti-nomianism: 'For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them' (Matt. 15.19–20).
4. H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: the message of the alien God and the beginnings of Christianity* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 42–3.
5. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, pp. 42–5, 80–90.
6. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 46.
7. M. Newall, 'Biblical veganism: an examination of 1 Timothy 4:1–8', *Journal of Animal Ethics*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (2021), pp. 11–35.
8. See *Ennead* II.9.15, 18.
9. M. Meyer (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: the international edition* (New York NY: HarperOne, 2007), pp. 133–56.
10. E. Yamauchi, 'The Gnostics and history', *JETS*, Vol. 14, no. 1 (1971), pp. 29–40.
11. Gospel of Thomas, Saying 14.4–5:
 4. And if you go into any land and wander from place to place, [and] if they take you in, [then] eat what they will set before you. Heal the sick among them!
 5. For what goes into your mouth will not defile you. Rather, what comes out of your mouth will defile you.
12. For example, Saying 51 of the Gospel of Thomas affirms that the resurrection has already taken place.
13. O. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?: The witness of the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1958).
14. O. Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 324–7.
15. W. Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London and New York NY: Burns and Oates, 1977), p. 201.
16. The New Testament's replacement of the Passover meal with the non-violent Lord's Supper can be seen as going in this direction of peace.
17. Bauckham underlines the vegetarian ideal of Genesis and how, '[i]n the context of Genesis 1, there is no question of killing them for food: both humans and animals are vegetarian'. R. Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: rediscovering the community of creation* (London: DLT, 2010), p. 18, see also pp. 19, 23. Likewise, Linzey and Cohn-Sherbok highlight that 'Judaism has invariably held vegetarianism to be the ideal God-given diet for human beings'. A. Linzey and D. Cohn-Sherbok, *After Noah: animals and the liberation of theology* (London: Mowbray, 1997), p. 57, see also pp. 17–20; R. Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: green exegesis and theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), pp. 2–7, 227; A. Linzey, *Animal Gospel: Christian faith as though animals mattered* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), pp. 32–6, 53–9.
18. This view of proleptically repairing and restoring a broken world in the hope of God's future resembles the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam*. J. Sacks, *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the twenty-first century* (New York NY: Schocken Books, 2009); J. Sacks, *To Heal the World: the ethics of responsibility* (New York NY: Schocken Books, 2005).

19. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: on the ground and the implications of a Christian eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 2002), pp. 2–7, 200–1, 150–1, 274–5; see N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: rethinking heaven, the resurrection, and the mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).
20. J. Poore and T. Nemecek, 'Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers', *Science*, Vol. 360, no. 6392 (2018), pp. 987–92; M. A. Clark, M. Springmann, J. Hill et al., 'Multiple health and environmental impacts of foods', *PNAS*, Vol. 116, no. 46 (2019), pp. 23357–62; T. Regan, *Empty Cages: facing the challenge of animal rights* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

Author biography

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