

Food

Are Vegetarians Intellectually Honest?

by Reo M. Christenson

Vegetarianism is one of the cherished beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Because it is a unique one, not shared by any other Protestant church (known to me), it is given a great deal of prominence by many Adventists — and by their church journals. And since a nationwide interest in vegetarianism has developed within recent years, considerable pride is taken in the church's pioneering role in advocating the merits of a vegetarian way of life. For many, strict adherence to it is one of the best indications that one is a truly loyal church member and is conscientiously preparing for Christ's return. Nonadherence is viewed by some as a sure sign of spiritual laxity, of a stubborn refusal to respect and obey the light which has been given the church on this matter. Vegetarian meals are *de rigeur* at official gatherings.

As it happens, however, vegetarianism is perhaps the least biblical of all Adventist be-

liefs. It is rather remarkable, considering the weight often attached to it, that this belief does not have the support of a single, clear-cut, admonitory verse in either the Old Testament or the New. Of equal importance to this inquiry, the church's treatment of the biblical and scientific evidence pertaining to the eating of meat often demonstrates a disturbing disregard for the basic requirements of intellectual integrity.

The effort to find indirect (there being no direct) biblical support for vegetarianism largely focuses upon the following: God's original diet for man was vegetarian; no meat was consumed in the garden of Eden. The children of Israel were rebuked for lusting after flesh when wandering in the wilderness; when the quail ". . . was yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was kindled against the people" (Num. 11:33). Daniel and his companions ate a vegetarian diet in preference to the king's appointed fare, and "at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh" than the countenances of those who ate the king's meat (Dan. 1:15). John the Baptist, whose mission to call upon the Israelites to

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prepare for their coming Messiah is seen as foreshadowing our mission today, subsisted on locusts and wild honey. Paul counseled, some have said, against eating meat by warning us not to “eat meat with the blood thereof”; since meat cannot be fully drained of its blood before it is consumed, this was basically a vegetarian counsel.

How conclusive is this biblical evidence? And how selective is it, taking the Bible as a whole? Since death was not a part of the divine scheme of things, it is reasonable to assume that vegetarianism was indeed the dietary practice in Eden. In order to eat meat, animals, birds or fish must die, and death was to appear only as a punishment for sin. Whether vegetarianism was best for man’s health or simply a necessary concomitant of a world in which death was absent, is not clear from this situation. On the other hand, once sin had appeared, clean meats were eaten with God’s specific approval. In fact, some of the food consumed by the Levites, who were God’s ministers to His people, consisted of the flesh sacrificed for man’s sins. If the Lord believed a vegetarian diet promoted man’s spiritual welfare, it is curious that His spiritual leaders were expected to subsist so largely on flesh. And the Israelites, as keepers of flocks and herds, were always flesh eaters, as numerous Old Testament references attest.

How much significance should be attached to the fact that the children of Israel improperly “lusted” after flesh, and that the Lord punished them for that lust? If we read the various passages associated with this event, we learn that the Israelites also lusted after cucumbers, melons and onions (Num. 11:5). Logic would dictate that if it were sinful to lust after flesh, it was equally sinful to lust after these. It is quite clear, however, that the Israelites’ offense was their dissatisfaction with what the Lord had given them — manna. Theirs was a complaining and fretful spirit, one of ingratitude despite the perfect diet given them by the Lord. And that spirit constituted their sin.

Rather than “defile” themselves with the king’s meat or wine, Daniel and his friends

desired “pulse to eat and water to drink.” They were given their preferred diet, and the results were gratifying (Dan. 1:15). But why, in fact, were they vegetarians during this period? We can only speculate, of course, but notice that the Babylonians made no distinction between the clean and the unclean meats. Nor were their butchery practices consonant with Mosaic law. This may well have accounted for the young Hebrews’ desire to confine themselves to a vegetarian diet. In any case, however, it does not appear that Daniel was a vegetarian as a matter of settled practice. In Daniel 10:3, Daniel says of a period when he was in mourning, “I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.” The most reasonable interpretation of this passage is that Daniel did anoint himself and did eat flesh *after* the three weeks had elapsed. If you say, “I will eat no dessert for three weeks,” the natural assumption is that you will resume eating it after the three weeks have ended.

John the Baptist, while preaching in the wilderness, ate a vegetarian diet. But is the vegetarian diet of John more significant than the nonvegetarian diet of Jesus? Is the servant’s example greater than that of his Master? Jesus not only failed to endorse vegetarianism but repeatedly sanctioned the eating of flesh — by parable, by action, by miracles and by example. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father celebrated the return of his wayward child by killing the fatted calf. This does not directly endorse the eating of flesh, but since Jesus could construct His parables as He wished, His inclusion of meat eating as part of the festivities celebrating the return of the prodigal from a life of sin is not without some probative value. Moreover, when Jesus said, “If his son ‘ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?’” He is clearly comparing something desirable with something undesirable.

We are all aware that one of Jesus’ greatest miracles involved the multiplication of fish when the 5,000 were fed. Had He wished to suggest that a vegetarian diet was preferable, He could have multiplied the loaves alone and made the point dramatically. But He

didn't. After His resurrection, He helped Peter and some other disciples conduct an especially successful fishing expedition ["cast the net on the right side of the ship and ye shall find" (John 21:6)]. And though He was preparing to ascend to His Father, He ate flesh when the fishing party came to land.

Jesus had numerous opportunities to recommend vegetarianism, but He declined to do so. Every aspect of His life which bore any relation to diet gave support to flesh eating rather than to vegetarianism. It is passing strange that so many Adventists glide silently past the example of the Sinless One, whose life is the perfect pattern for us to follow, and proceed to advocate vegetarianism as the religious ideal. One can almost sense their unspoken disappointment with Jesus' example — if only He had been a vegetarian! If vegetarianism is the preferred diet, the one which best promotes our spiritual welfare and which most closely approximates God's will for us, wouldn't Jesus have set just a little better example for us if He had been a vegetarian? Was He truly perfect except for this one inexplicable shortcoming? The implication of many Adventists is precisely this — although, of course, they would never acknowledge it.

Paul admonished the converted Jews to abstain from "meats offered to idols and from blood and from things strangled." Is this a veiled endorsement of vegetarianism? Quite clearly not. While releasing these converts from a multitude of Mosaic restrictions, he reminds them that the Mosaic requirement remains in effect concerning the eating of blood and of flesh which was not bled properly. And he wants to give no symbolic sanction to idol worship by eating meat sacrificed to idols. If eating meat is forbidden because the blood is never totally drained from the flesh, the Israelites violated God's commands even when they ate meat Kosher-style. But Paul was clearly trying to discard unnecessary Mosaic requirements for Christians rather than make them more stringent.

While dealing with Paul, incidentally, vegetarians do not commonly quote his

warning that "in the latter times some shall depart from the faith . . . commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim. 4:3). How many of us would feel uncomfortable in an Adventist religious gathering, even quoting this verse, if vegetarianism were being discussed?

There is other biblical evidence to consider. Exodus 16:12 reads, "At even ye shall eat flesh and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God." Deuteronomy 12:15 declares, "Notwithstanding thou mayest kill and eat flesh in all thy gates . . . according to the blessing of the Lord thy God which he hath given thee. . . ." Both of these verses seem to associate meat-eating with God's blessings and bounties.

Not only did Moses expressly permit the eating of clean meats, but also the three messengers of the Lord sent to assure Abraham and Sarah that she would bear a son in her old age, consumed a "calf tender and good" (Gen. 18:7). Presumably these were angels in human disguise. We do not expect angels, sent by the Lord, to conduct themselves in a manner displeasing to Him. But even more compelling, when God commanded the ravens to feed Elijah "by the brook Cherith," He could have ordered them to bring Elijah any food that he wished. But selecting from among the vast variety of edible substances upon the earth, God chose to have the ravens bring Elijah "bread and flesh in the morning and bread and flesh in the evening" (1 Kings 17:18). And this, remember, took place shortly before Elijah was "taken up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11). That is, he ate flesh, supplied by God, while preparing for translation. Suppose the Lord had given Elijah a diet of fruit, grain and nuts; is there any doubt that vegetarians would jubilantly cite that fact as clear evidence of God's preferred diet? Why, then, is this verse so studiously ignored when vegetarianism is discussed?

In sum, if it is reasonable to assume that vegetarianism was the preferred diet for un-fallen man, it is equally reasonable — all evidence considered — to assume that a diet which includes meat was God's preferred

diet for fallen man and for those as victorious as Elijah and Jesus as well.

There is, it seems, a total absence of credible biblical support for vegetarianism. But should we practice it because meat has become more diseased in our time and hence is less suitable for human consumption? This is possible, since there is no scientific basis for comparing the quality of meat today with that of centuries past. But even here, the evidence as a whole does not support vegetarian claims.

True, additives and plant accidents have occasionally caused worrisome meat contamination. Pollution of rivers, lakes and oceans has sometimes caused concern about the safety of eating sea foods. But there is also apprehension about the consumption of fruits and vegetables because of the large

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amounts of poisonous sprays which are applied in our day. Moreover, aflatoxin — the product of a mold which grows in stored peanuts and grain — is one of the most lethal carcinogens known to man. William Tucker has observed that “stomach cancer is rife in underdeveloped countries in Asia and Africa” (200 times as high as in the U.S.) because, it is believed, of the presence of this substance in the popular diet.¹ Tucker notes that “the highest quantity of aflatoxin ever found in the U.S. by the Food and Drug Administration was in a jar of ‘natural’ peanut butter.”² If meat *can* be dangerous to the health under certain circumstances, so can grain and peanut butter.

As for the safety of meat products, it is important to note that tuberculosis, once rampant among cattle, has largely been eliminated in the U.S. So have Bang’s disease and hoof-and-mouth disease. Many other live-

stock and poultry diseases are minimized by today’s carefully prepared animal diet and by modern veterinary science. In previous periods, moreover, meat prepared for human consumption was not refrigerated, a practice which inevitably produced spoilage and contamination. It was also normally exposed to flies, dust and miscellaneous contaminants which can now be largely avoided. And while no informed person believes federal or state meat inspection practices are fully adequate, they are surely superior to the total lack of inspection which once prevailed.

It is not being urged that the church abandon its belief that meat may someday become so diseased or contaminated that its use should be discontinued. That day could come. But there is almost no cogent evidence that that day is upon us. While some non-Adventist writers do recommend a vegetarian diet, their evidence is almost entirely assertive and speculative rather than scientifically grounded.

But isn’t modern science vindicating vegetarianism, now that we know about cholesterol and its relation to the consumption of animal fat? The answer is “no.” What modern science has done is cast doubt on the advisability of eating *fatty* meat. But it has not demonstrated the undesirability of eating moderate amounts of lean meat, poultry and fish. Probably 99 percent of the nation’s nutritionists recommend these forms of flesh as healthful additions to the diet.

Since God has specifically approved the eating of clean meat, we should not rule out the possibility that He knew what He was doing. Let’s look at some recent evidence. *Consumer Reports*, a highly authoritative journal, has noted that vitamin B₁₂ is seldom found in plant foods.³ “A problem may arise among people who eat little or no animal protein,” the editors continue, “particularly if their diet is high in cereal grains.” They note that wheat contains phytates, which can make zinc “unavailable for absorption by the body.”⁴ They further note that “. . . the body absorbs only about five percent of the iron in vegetable sources, compared to about 15 percent from meats and fish. . . . If you eat little

meat, poultry and fish, you may already be iron deficient or at least headed that way. If you're a strict vegetarian . . . your iron consumption may be insufficient for your needs."⁵ The evidence quite clearly indicates that a strict vegetarian diet is a rather hazardous one.

The best the vegetarians can do is cite evidence that they can have an adequate diet without meat if they eat eggs and drink milk. But that is feeble support for vegetarianism, since it is equally possible to have an adequate diet without peanut butter, for example, or veggieburgers, and macaroni and cheese.

It is sometimes argued that meat eating should be discouraged because it involves a cruel and bloody business — that of butchery. Distaste for this practice is experienced by many people of humane tastes. But that meat eating requires slaughter is hardly a new discovery; Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jesus and God the Father were doubtless aware of what was involved in the preliminaries to serving a steak or a fillet. Yet they approved of meat consumption. Were they thoughtlessly or somewhat callously sanctioning a practice which finer sensibilities in our day reject?

Finally, is meat eating, whether meat is diseased or not, somehow inimical to spiritual development? Do the Christian virtues flourish more readily when one confines his or her diet to a vegetarian or a lacto-vegetarian diet? If eating flesh really *is* a hindrance to spiritual health and growth, God would surely, somewhere in the 1,000 pages of Scripture, have warned us against its consumption. Would God have given Elijah a food that was detrimental to his spiritual welfare? Could Jesus be properly regarded as perfect, if His example encouraged His followers to consume a diet that militated against the highest spiritual achievements? True, God may make progressive revelations of His will for man, *but not in conflict with His prior revelations*: additional light, yes; contradictory light, no.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. William Tucker, "Of Mites and Men," *Harpers*, Aug. 1978, p. 56.

2. *Ibid.*

3. "Nutrition As Therapy," *Consumer Reports*, Jan. 1980, p. 24.

What is most perturbing about the attitude of most Adventist vegetarians is the quite flagrant selectivity with which they marshal evidence to support their views. A few biblical verses are cited, given a highly questionable interpretation, and all the other biblical verses on the subject are blandly ignored. A few contemporary writers on health are cited, whereas recognized authorities who disagree are disregarded. Is this consistent with intellectual integrity? If vegetarian Christians display less intellectual honesty and fairness in dealing with the Scriptures and with scientific evidence than do non-vegetarians, one wonders if vegetarianism is indeed promoting their spiritual development.

In general, the church believes that we should study *all* the biblical verses which pertain to a given subject before arriving at doctrinal conclusions. Why should this not apply to meat-eating? Adventist doctors typically do not draw medical conclusions without studying all the relevant medical evidence. Why should meat-eating be treated differently, insofar as scientific evidence is involved?

One should have no quarrel with those who say, "The evidence does not yet support the belief that eating lean meat, poultry and fish is injurious to health, but I have faith that that day will yet come." But we have a right to be distressed when people cite scientific and Scriptural evidence with misleading selectivity, to buttress a treasured view. Intellectual honesty is a virtue that is not inappropriate for Christians to manifest.

Mrs. E. G. White once wrote that "Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain 'Thus saith the Lord' in its support."⁶ How much emphasis, then, should the church devote to a belief which not only lacks biblical foundations but confronts an impressive array of contrary biblical evidence? As a people of the Word, this is a question that should be squarely faced.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

5. "Do Women Need Iron Supplements?" *Consumer Reports*, Sept. 1978, p. 504.

6. *The Great Controversy*, p. 595.