



Animals, Food, and Faith

WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD CARE ABOUT
THEIR DIETARY CHOICES

Topics

- ▶ Introduction
 - ▶ My theological and practical perspective
- ▶ Theological Context
- ▶ Impacts of Factory Farming
 - ▶ On the animals
 - ▶ On the environment, including climate change, air and water pollution, biodiversity
 - ▶ On humans, including environmental justice, world hunger, public health, and personal health
- ▶ Paths forward
- ▶ Closing remarks

Perspective is Everything

- ▶ Theological
 - ▶ There are many ways to come to the conclusion that animals are a critical – not just appropriate – Christian concern and that diet is central to that concern. For me, the most powerful path is through the creation stories in Genesis.
- ▶ Practical
 - ▶ I am vegan (which involves more than food choices). You may choose another path. I am here to provide information; it is your role to draw conclusions and to take appropriate action to live in accordance with your values, ethics, and religious beliefs.
 - ▶ The goal is progress, not perfection; every step that helps the animals is a step in the right direction.

Genesis 1:26 (NIV)



Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

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- ▶ Our creation in God's image, which is fundamental to what it means to be human, is directly link to our rule, or dominion, over the animals; how we understand one informs how we understand the other.
 - ▶ To be created in God's image does not confer special status on humans. Looking at how images of rulers were used in ancient times to represent rules in far flung parts of empires, modern scholars agree that our creation in God's image means we are intended to represent/reflect God's character to creation, to demonstrate who God is.
 - ▶ Therefore, we exercise *God's* dominion, not our own; as Terrence Fretheim has expressed it, our creation in God's image and our dominion over animals is a “power-sharing relationship” with God.
 - ▶ It is a job description. Caring for the animals is the first job we were given at the creation.

It's not just me:

“When we sin as the image bearers of God, we are saying to the whole creation, to all of nature under our dominion, to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field: ‘This is how God is. This is how your Creator behaves. Look in the mirror; look at us, and you will see the character of God Almighty.’”

R.C. Sproul, 1939-2017

“Cruelty to animals is as if man did not love God.”

Cardinal John Henry Newman, 1801-1890

"We may pretend to what religion we please, but cruelty is atheism. We may make our boast of Christianity; but cruelty is infidelity. We may trust to our orthodoxy; but cruelty is the worst of heresies."

*Rev. Humphrey Primatt,
A Dissertation on the Duty of Mercy and
Sin of Cruelty to Brute Animals (1776)*

“The creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 see the creation of humanity as quite specifically the creation of an agent, a person, who can care for and protect the animal world, reflecting the care of God himself who enjoys the goodness of what he has made.”

*Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury
Operation Noah Annual Lecture, 2009*

- ▶ This job is directly tied to *the animals*, not the planet and not natural resources (although scripture has much to say about those obligations, as well). When we talk about Creation Care, we **must** include our relationships with animals. Animals are a part of creation separate and apart from natural resources such as rivers and trees.
- ▶ Animals are not just interchangeable members of species, but each is a unique individual; we exercise God's dominion over those individuals, just as God exercises his dominion over each of us as individuals. Remember that not one sparrow falls without the Father. (Matt. 10:29)
- ▶ The science is clear: mammals, birds, and fish (at a minimum) are *sentient*. Individual animals know pain and pleasure, happiness and sadness, comfort and fear. They form meaningful relationships and they mourn the loss of those relationships. They can be optimistic or pessimistic. They have unique personalities.
- ▶ They are not just alive, they have lives; they are not just biology, they are biography (Jonathan Balcomb).
- ▶ **This is why we owe the animals more than thoughtful stewardship; we owe them compassion and mercy.**

Photo credits: David Wye; bioimmersion.com archives; Jenny Huang, via Wikimedia Commons



This includes the animals we call food.



If a thing would be cruel if someone did it to your dog,
it is cruel when someone does it to an animal bound
for a dinner plate.



Photo: Esther the Wonder Pig with her “siblings,” Phil the dog and Corno the turkey (photo from Esther’s Facebook page 4/23/22)

Another theological point

- ▶ Our relationship with the animals is a power-based relationship in which humans hold 100% of the power.
- ▶ Scripture is replete with teachings about the right use of power and the evils of exploitation of the powerless.
- ▶ God never gives power without responsibility. Power comes from God and is answerable to Him.

Dietary Choices

- ▶ Dietary choices are the primary way most of us interact with animals. Every day, three times a day, we make decisions that impact our fellow animal creatures, as well as our planet and our human neighbors. This includes meat, dairy, and seafood.
- ▶ We cannot discuss dietary choices without discussing factory farming, a post-WWII phenomenon that has provided cheap meat in ample supply, giving us dollar value meals from our favorite fast food emporium and allowing many to eat animal products three times a day, seven days a week.
- ▶ But at what cost? And how should that cost inform our choices as Christians?

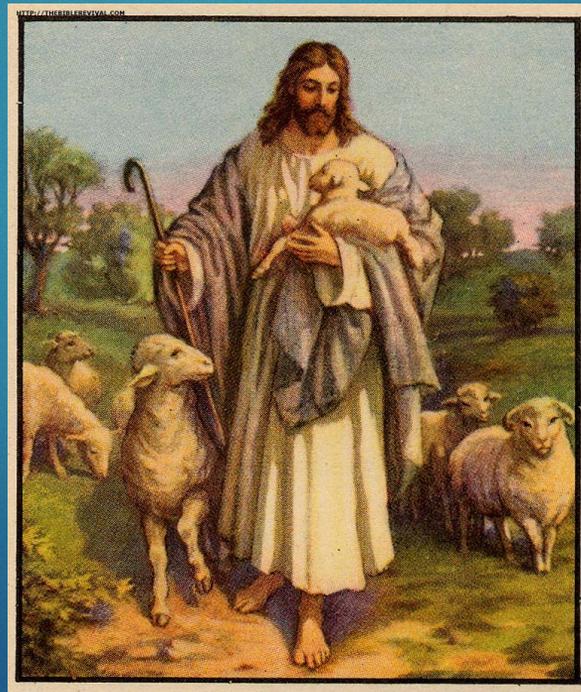
(Much of the information on the following slides comes from Farm Sanctuary and Compassion in World Farming. These sites have more detailed citations regarding source material. Additional resources are provided at the end of this presentation.)

Costs to the Animals

- ▶ *First and foremost*, is the cost in unrelenting cruelty from birth to death for untold numbers of animals in factory farms worldwide.
- ▶ Information about the specific cruelties in factory farming are readily available. Excellent sources are Farm Sanctuary, Compassion in World Farming, and Mercy For Animals. It is worse than you think. As you look into these details – and I urge you to become educated – remember these are sentient individual beings, and they suffer from these deprivations – both legal and illegal – in the same way your dog or cat would.
- ▶ Nearly ten *billion* animals are slaughtered each year in the United States alone. Roughly 90% of those animals come from factory farms.
- ▶ Don't forget the fishes. Fishes are also sentient individuals, in all the ways described above. These animals suffer terribly as well. National Geographic estimates that 171 million tons of fish are currently being harvested from the ocean per year. In the next 10 years, that number is expected to rise to 201 million tons. “It is estimated that between 17.9 and 39.5 million tons of bycatch are discarded by fisheries yearly.” (Farm Sanctuary)

But there is much, much more

- ▶ The factory farming system is a spectacular failure of our duty to reflect God's character to our fellow creatures.
- ▶ We should not be surprised, when we stray so far from God's intention, that we pay a steep price.



Cost to the Environment

“The United Nations states that animal agriculture ‘is exerting mounting pressure on the world’s natural resources’ and contributes to land degradation, species loss, and water pollution and waste.”

(Farm Sanctuary)

Climate Change

- ▶ Animal agriculture is responsible for 14.5% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, and 66% in the U.S. This includes carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. Livestock farming produces 37% and 65% of our global methane and nitrous oxide emissions respectively. Both gases are much more potent than carbon dioxide. (Compassion in World Farming)
- ▶ Approximately 80% of deforestation in the Amazon Rainforest has been done to clear land for cattle. Today, the number of cows in the Amazon Rainforest has grown to 70-80 million compared to 5 million in the 1960's. Climate scientists stress the importance of the Amazon because of the vital role it plays in filtering carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. (Farm Sanctuary)
- ▶ *We will not be able to effectively address climate change if we do not address our dietary choices.*

Photo Forbes.com



Emissions of meat giant JBS rival rich countries, data shows

“Brazilian meat processor JBS SA was responsible last year for dumping the equivalent of 421.6 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, shows data compiled by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. That’s larger than the reported 2020 emissions of Italy (418 million tons), Spain (314.5 million tons) and the Netherlands (180.4 million tons).

The data was included in a briefing and report that a coalition of environmental groups released today ahead of the company's annual shareholder meeting in São Paulo, Brazil, on Friday. It shows a 51 percent increase from IATP’s 2016 estimate of JBS’s carbon footprint.”

ClimateWire, April 21, 2022:

Biodiversity

- ▶ Impacts include habitat destruction and toxic wastes, which can create “dead zones,” particularly in waterways. (Compassion in World Farming)
- ▶ Just one example: “An estimated 1,470 jaguars in Brazil’s Amazon rainforest were killed or displaced between 2016 to 2019 due to accelerated deforestation and the wildfires that were linked to it.” (Washington Post, March 9, 2022, *Demand for meat is destroying the Amazon. Smarter choices at the dinner table can go a long way to help*, quoting Nico Muzi, former Europe director of Mighty Earth.)
- ▶ Overfishing results in fish population collapse.

Photo: CNN



Water and Air Pollution

In 2010, the United Nations has said, “The livestock business is among the most damaging sectors to the earth's increasingly scarce water resources, contributing among other things to water pollution from animal wastes, antibiotics and hormones, chemicals from tanneries, fertilisers [sic] and the pesticides used to spray feed crops.” (Quoted by Compassion in World Farming)



Photo credit: David Wye

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- ▶ In the US, factory farms produce more than 500 million tons of manure per year, posing a significant threat to air and water resources. (Farm Sanctuary)
 - ▶ “Some large farms can produce more raw waste than the human population of a large US city.” (Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2008, quoted by Compassion in World Farming).
 - ▶ Yet this waste is largely unregulated. It is often collected in ponds or lagoons, where it emits strong odors, attracts flies and other pests, and is in danger of overflow in serious storms or flooding situations, posing serious water pollution concerns. It is also sometimes sprayed on surrounding land, leaching into the land and water.
 - ▶ Fertilizer and pesticides used for growing animal feed is another contributor to pollution problems. “More traditional farming methods can be relatively efficient, converting grass and other waste products into useful food. But the ‘fast-growth, high-yield’ factory-farming model is far less efficient, using substantial amounts of grain and protein-rich soya. These crops often receive large quantities of pesticides and nitrogen-and-phosphorus-rich fertiliser to boost plant growth. This has obvious uses, helping us to achieve higher plant yields, but a large amount of the fertiliser can be wasted and lost to the environment.” (Compassion in World Farming)

- ▶ *Fish Farms*: In fish farms, fishes are often kept confined to netted pens close to the shore; feces and diseases from the farmed fish pollute the surrounding water, promote the growth of algae blooms, and destroy nearby ecosystems. (Farm Sanctuary)
- ▶ *Ocean Floor*: Long line fishing and deep sea trawling damage delicate ocean ecosystems.
- ▶ *Fishing Trash*: According to the World Wildlife Fund, “between 500,000 to 1 million tons of fishing gear are discarded or lost in the ocean every year. Discarded nets, lines, and ropes now make up about 46% of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.”
- ▶ *Plastic Waste*: A new (September 2021) study from the Nature Conservancy and the University of California Santa Barbara puts the number even higher: “The study reveals that more than 100 million pounds of plastic pollution enters the ocean each year from lost fishing gear.”
- ▶ *Ghost Fishing Gear*: “Ghost fishing gear is the deadliest form of marine plastic as it unselectively catches wildlife, entangling marine mammals, seabirds, sea turtles, and sharks, subjecting them to a slow and painful death through exhaustion and suffocation. Ghost fishing gear also damages critical marine habitats such as coral reefs. Additionally, it’s responsible for the loss of commercially valuable fish stocks, undermining both the overall sustainability of fisheries as well as the people who depend on fish for food and livelihoods.” (WWF)

Direct Human Costs

“If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who deal likewise with their fellow men.”

St. Francis of Assisi



Environmental Justice

Factory farms are in low-income neighborhoods, often in communities of color, causing health and enjoyment issues among the most vulnerable. These communities often experience higher rates of disease, including headaches, asthma, birth defects, lower life expectancy. (Farm Sanctuary)

Immigration/Worker Exploitation

Factory farms and slaughter facilities often employ people from marginalized communities, including undocumented workers, who are very much at the mercy of their employers. The work involves:

- ▶ danger from very high speed slaughter line speeds, resulting in a high rate of amputations
 - ▶ Farm Sanctuary reports that between 2016 and 2018, there was an average of 1.56 reported amputations per month for workers in the meat processing industry
- ▶ long hours
- ▶ low pay
- ▶ very high turnover in the workplace, sometimes greater than 100% in a year
- ▶ repetitive work

Impacts are emotional as well as physical, with workers experiencing

- ▶ PTSD
- ▶ increased violence, including domestic violence
- ▶ drug and alcohol abuse

Farmers

- ▶ The meat industry is dominated by a handful of global corporations, although they operate under several different brand names.
- ▶ Farmers must deal with these businesses in order to sell their meat, which puts farmers at a significant disadvantage.
- ▶ They often wind up holding much of the economic risk while gleaning few of the profits.

World Hunger

- ▶ “In the United States, 80% of agricultural land is utilized to raise animals for food or to grow their feed. Animal-based foods demand more resources, such as land, than plant-based foods do. If crops grown in the United States were directed towards foods for humans, instead of for livestock, they **could feed three times more people** than today, according to the Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota.” (Farm Sanctuary)
- ▶ “Although factory-farmed animals are given a lot of feed, much is wasted - animals cannot convert everything they eat into meat because the energy is used for other activities, such as moving around and keeping warm. In 2000, it was calculated that for every kilo of meat produced, many more kilos of animal feed are required.” (Compassion in World Farming)

Public Health

- ▶ Factory farms are a breeding ground for disease, including emerging pathogens and virulent strains of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The unnatural feeds, hormones, and excessive quantities of antibiotics used put the human population at risk for chronic disease, obesity, and drug-resistant bacteria, and pose the threat of major zoonotic disease outbreaks.
- ▶ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warns: “...3 out of every 4 new or emerging infectious diseases in people come from animals.” These include viruses, bacteria, fungi and parasites, and they infect millions of U.S. citizens every year.

(Farm Sanctuary)

Personal Health

In general, people on a whole foods, plant-based diet have lower risks of obesity, high blood pressure, certain types of cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and high cholesterol.

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- ▶ When we consume products from factory farms, we exercise our God-given power to participate in, finance, and benefit from – indeed, to help cause -- all of these costs.
 - ▶ That is the issue we need to grapple with through the lens of our Christian faith.

Paths Forward

- ▶ You do not need to go vegan (but you can! And it's easier than you think!)
 - ▶ Ethically source your meat – hard to do and expensive; labels can be deceptive
 - ▶ Meatless Mondays, Vegan 'Til Six, Meatless Lent
 - ▶ Lots of imitation meats and cheeses now available
 - ▶ Cell-grown meats coming soon
- ▶ Become active in campaigns to pressure businesses to source animal protein from more ethical sources (e.g., cage free eggs)
- ▶ Support legislative efforts to improve conditions for farmed animals and develop more sustainable farming practices.

Final Words

I believe that we are created to live together, in cooperation, mercy, & mutual support (that is, to reflect God's image to the world). This goes not only for how we live with other animals, but how we live with our fellow humans and the planet. When we do this, there is enough, & everyone can flourish. When we choose instead to live in competition & domination (that is, we distort God's image & misuse power), we bring harm on ourselves & even when we "win," we lose. Our dietary choices have a significant impact on how well we are living into the image in which we are created. Scripture tells us that in the Garden of Eden and in the new creation, all the animals – including humans – eat only plants, and we all live peaceably together. For me, a vegan diet helps to make real and present the prayer, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven."



“I love that every time I sit down to eat, I’m able to take a stand on behalf mercy and compassion, and against misery and cruelty. Saint Paul calls on us to ‘pray ceaselessly,’ and for me, veganism is a kind of prayer.”

~ Bruce Friedrich (interview at *Composting Faith*)



Photo credit: unknown, received in tweet
from Rose Smith @hahnsmith

Resources

- ▶ Dominion In The Image of God Resources Page
<http://dominionintheimage.blogspot.com/p/resources.html>
- ▶ Farm Sanctuary, <https://www.farmsanctuary.org/>, see especially pages titles The Issues and The Animals
- ▶ Compassion in World Farming, <https://www.ciwf.com/>
- ▶ Forks Over Knives, <https://www.forksoverknives.com/>
- ▶ Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, <https://www.pcrm.org/>
- ▶ Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), Industrial Agriculture page
<https://www.iatp.org/industrial-livestock>