

## **Towards a Theologically-motivated Veganism**

By [Tyler John](#), 2013

I am a vegan because I am a Christian. I believe that the virtues of peace-making and compassion demanded by the life of Jesus Christ are incompatible with the gratuitous violence, bloodshed, and suffering perpetrated by the meat and dairy industries. Moreover, I believe that the way of life that Scripture commands is one of care for creation, particularly for those creatures that are most weak and vulnerable. The contemporary western farming industry is objectionable on many levels, from concerns about animal welfare to those of human health, environmental stewardship, resource efficiency, and justice for oppressed human beings. Given the many detriments of the animal farming industry, it seems like nearly everyone should be somewhat uncomfortable with its procedures and hesitant to support it by purchasing and consuming animal products, yet meat and dairy remains a central staple in the American diet and Christians remain some of the most impassioned opponents of those who would maintain a vegan ethic. Herein, I hope to dispel some of the Christian antagonism to veganism and help others to understand why I, and a growing number of Christians besides, have chosen to adopt a vegan diet. Through an analysis of several key passages and themes in Scripture and an examination of a few purported problem passages for Christian vegans, I hope to demonstrate that there are very strong theological reasons for Christian adherence to a committed vegan lifestyle.

### **A Creation Ethic**

In Genesis 1-2, Scripture depicts the special role that God has given humans; His original intent for humanity's place in the created order. In Genesis 1:26, God says: "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." The implication of this verse is that humans were created, at least in part, so that we could rule over all of creation. This kind of ruling was by no means intended to be tyrannical and dominical. In Genesis 2:19-20 we see what this stewardship might have looked like, as God brought animals to Adam so that he could give them names. This kind of affectionate work is demonstrative of a caring and compassionate ruler. Adam knew the creatures not as food, not as a resource, but as named animals that he was to look after. In fact, no human was even given meat to eat until after the flood, and was instead expected to "eat from any tree in the garden", given "every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit

with seed in it". If God has given us the charge to be caretakers and stewards of creation, and indeed it was the first commandment given to us, then surely Christians must follow this charge.

It is also quite clear that God did not create animals just so that we could enjoy eating them. This is evidenced by the sheer variety of creatures He created. (He surely knew that we would eat only a select few), His rescue of many of these varieties on the ark, and the fact that He did not permit man to eat animals until after the flood, which presumably desolated and deforested the earth to the point at which humans could not find enough plants to eat and were required to eat animals for adequate nutrition. The creation-flood narrative shows us that it was not God's desire for man to kill and eat animals from the beginning; it was only a concession made to sustain human life in a time of malnourishment. It is more likely that God created animals for His own good pleasure and for the animals' own sakes—animals which He desired to have fruitful and happy lives.

The world today is vastly different from that which God planned for us, as is the way in which our world treats God's creatures. 97% of chickens and pigs and 61% of beef cattle in America are raised by concentrated animal feeding organizations, factory farms that are profoundly destructive to God's created order. Within the walls of any given factory farm, chickens are forcibly bred for maximum size, made to stand in piles of their own excrement in cages the area of an 8-1/2x11" sheet of paper, and debeaked with a hot blade, subjecting the birds to lives of chronic pain in their legs and beak stubs. Later they will have their throats slit open or their heads torn off (by a human being) on an assembly line. Others are boiled alive. Cattle are no better off, contained with up to 100,000 other animals in a feedlot so small that the cattle cannot turn around or perform instinctual activities. Their diet is so poor that many cattle suffocate to death due to the gaseous bloating in their stomachs. Pigs, far more intelligent and relational even than dogs, live their entire lives in miniscule metal crates six square feet in size, are castrated without painkiller, and have their teeth sawed off at an early age. And the environmental impacts of factory farming are catastrophic. Clearly, this is not what God had in mind when He made humans His high stewards of creation.

### **The Least of These**

There can be little doubt that the life of Jesus Christ bespeaks a radical commitment to peacemaking and compassion for others. Where the Jewish people wrongly expected the coming of a triumphant warrior-king, Jesus revealed the true ethic of God's Kingdom: One of strength in weakness and power in humility and

mercy. Jesus turns the legalistic and satisficing morality of the intertestamental Jewish people upside-down, proclaiming His blessings and the fullness of His kingdom unto the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. Jesus completes the temporary and insufficient laws of the Old Testament, calling us away from acts of vengeance, bloodshed, and gratuitous violence, and toward a life of love even for one's enemies. In the midst of a patriarchal society, Jesus shows compassion for the women around Him. He refuses to look down on the prostitutes and the poor and the children - those castigated and forgotten by the elitist religious society - and instead offers to them the fullness of His Kingdom and mercy. In Matthew 25 He tells us, "just as you did it for one of these brothers and sisters, you did it for me". Children, foreigners, criminals, and all of those subjugated peoples in society were not beyond His love; and because His life is an example for all of His followers these peoples cannot be beyond our love either.

Like Jesus, we must look after the weak and the forgotten on Earth. Perhaps Jesus did not in His earthly life call for a radical reform of the farming industry, but would the Good Shepherd do so if He walked the earth today, in a society where animals are treated with less care than in any civilization in the earth's history? Jesus' commitments to defending the weak and the marginalized tell us something very important about God's nature: He does not play favorites and He looks after the crushed and abandoned. It is inconceivable that Jesus of the Gospels would endorse the factory farming industry. It seems that any god that looks upon the mistreatment of animals and winks is not the God of the Bible. The God who is incarnate in the person of Jesus and who states that "a righteous person cares for the life of his animal" and demands of His people that they not harness an ox and a donkey together and not muzzle an ox while it is treading grain would surely never give approval to the abuse of one's animals, the harnessing of a cow or a pig in an unforgiving cage, or the clipping of a chicken's beak or pig's teeth for its entire life.

Some may think that extending Jesus' compassion to animals is a stretch and that His concern was strictly with human-to-human care. I am not sure why one would think that this is true, but it certainly does seem true that Christians are obligated to look after their fellow humans. So what about the impact of meat production on the life of "the least of these" brothers and sisters of ours? Recent studies show that the production of meat is tremendously wasteful and unsustainable. Animals that are raised for food consume massive quantities of resources, and most of these resources are lost and never make it to our dinner plates. Several examples make this readily apparent. The production of one pound

of meat requires the consumption of thirteen pounds of grain, wasting 90 percent of the grain's protein, 96 percent of its calories, and all of its carbohydrates and fiber. The beef industry alone accounts for the waste of over 150 million tons of food every single year. In addition to wasting grains, meat production also wastes water. The production of 1 kilogram of animal protein requires roughly 100 times as much water as the production of 1 kilogram of plant protein. Growing 1 kg of potatoes requires approximately 132 gallons of water and growing 1 kg of wheat requires 238 gallons of water, while the production of 1 kg of beef consumes over 26,000 gallons of water. Finally, the meat industry is incredibly destructive of fossil fuels. 284 gallons of oil are required to raise just one cow for slaughter, due to the use of oil-based petrochemicals in the treatment of their feed.

Clearly, the production of meat is a gross misallocation of resources. In a world where our neighbors across the ocean cannot get enough clean water or food to survive, fossil fuels are being depleted at an alarming rate, and wars are fought over crude oil, how can we possibly justify the clear overreach of resources that meat production requires? Currently, 870 million people suffer from chronic hunger worldwide. Research shows that the grain used to feed livestock in the US alone could feed 800 million of these people. Surely we ought to be better stewards of the resources we have been given and love our neighbors as Jesus would, standing in solidarity against the vices of selfishness and resource gluttony involved in meat production and sharing our blessings with the needy. As Christians called to give to the thirsty something to drink and to the hungry something to eat, we cannot perpetuate the systematic destruction of resources that could be used to benefit our neighbors and combat world hunger. We must reject the production and consumption of meat.

### **The Sacrificial System**

In *Genesis 3*, after Adam and Eve broke their covenant with God and ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God cursed the Earth and submitted it to frustration. Humanity had fallen from God's high purpose for it and into the clutches of sin and death. In *Genesis 3:21* we are told that God's first action after the fall of humanity was to create garments of skin for Adam and Eve to clothe them. We know that this was not a mere covering for them—as they had already sewn together fig leaves to cover their nakedness—it served as a symbol of their horrific wrongdoing. The cost of rebelling against God was suffering and death, and Adam and Eve were forced to literally wear this truth on their own bodies. In chapter 4 we see Cain and Abel performing sacrifices to the Lord, but it is not

until Exodus that we learn the purpose of these blood offerings: atonement for human sin.

The powerful metaphors of the garment of skin and the sacrificial system as atonement for human sin are powerful precisely because animal death is a terrible thing. How can we have a coherent theology of the sacrificial system if we do not have an understanding of the badness of animal death? If we maintain that animal death is not so bad, then the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament lose their rich symbolic meaning, and our atonement theology becomes blunted as we lose our best metaphor for the badness of sin. Through the sacrificial system, God uses the terrible bloodshed of innocent animals precisely because humans are expected to understand animal death as a very bad thing. In fact, animal sacrifice in the Old Testament anticipates the most horrific sacrifice of all, as the innocent Son of God dies at the hands of and in atonement for sinful man. A proper understanding of Christ's atoning work on the cross and the hideous nature of human sin begins with and necessitates an understanding of animal death as a very bad thing.

### **Problem Passages**

Probably the biggest reason why so many Christians are antagonistic to a vegan ethic is because of a few "problem passages" that seem to indicate that it is permissible for Christians to eat meat. It seems that the two most powerful passages that might stand in opposition to a theologically motivated veganism are Luke 24:40-43 and Acts 10:9-16.

In Luke 24 we catch a rare glimpse into Jesus' diet as Jesus takes a piece of broiled fish and eats it in the presence of the disciples. Some Christians may object to a theologically-motivated veganism in virtue of the fact that Jesus seems to have eaten animals. Since Jesus never did anything wrong and Jesus ate animals, one might claim, it must not be wrong to eat animals. However, it seems wrong to think that we are allowed to do just anything that Jesus did at any time. Throughout Scripture Jesus does a number of things that we might normally think are wrong in light of the Bible's teachings. It does not seem like it would normally be okay for us to make a whip and drive people out of a temple, neglect our family members, wear expensive perfume instead of giving our money to the poor, call our religious leaders "white-washed tombs", talk back to our parents, call others fools, or take a stranger's colt and ride it into town, but Jesus does all of these things. We might also think that Jesus should have overturned the economic and social institutions of slavery and patriarchy, but He does not.

How can we make sense of this? In light of Jesus' larger mission and goal in the world, it was permissible for Jesus to do all of the things Scripture says that He does. Alvin Plantinga, likely the greatest Christian philosopher of religion of the 20th century, helps us understand this thusly:

"I have an obligation not to take bread from the grocery store without permission and another to tell the truth. Both sorts of obligation can be overridden, in specific circumstances, by other obligations—in the first case, perhaps, an obligation to feed my starving children and in the second (when the Nazis are pounding on the door) an obligation to protect human life. So we must distinguish *prima facie* duties or obligations from all-things-considered... obligations."

At times, Jesus' obligations to liberate the slaves and women He met and to refuse the mistreatment of animals were overridden by His overarching and powerful obligation to provide a foundation for the Church and call a people to Himself, given unto Him by His Father. Of course, it does not follow that you, personally, have powerful obligations that override your obligation to reject cruelty and violence toward animals. To say this follows implies that your life is just as important and uniquely mission-driven as the life of Jesus Christ—something that I do not think any of us would want to say. It is hard to see how any conflicting moral obligations could override our obligation to vegetarianism, unless we require meat for our own survival. Our obligation to keep on living and thereby do good works in the world does seem to be more important than our obligation to eat veganly. Happily, almost everyone in the West can get by very healthily and vivaciously without eating animal products, so we very likely have no good reason to animal products and thereby violate our obligation to veganism. Finally, even if we think this text proves that there is nothing wrong with using animals for food in principle, surely it does not give us the right to treat animals just any way we want. Even if it could be shown that eating meat is biblically permissible, it is surely impermissible to contribute to contemporary factory farming practices.

Acts 10 describes Peter's vision wherein a sheet filled with all kinds of ceremonially unclean animals - four-footed animals, reptiles, and wild birds—descends from Heaven and Peter is told to "get up... slaughter and eat." Some argue that this clearly shows that it is permissible for Christians to eat meat, as God tells Peter that "what God has made clean, you must not consider ritually unclean!" If God told us that we can eat meat, the argument goes, then of course we can eat meat.

However, in Acts 10:28 we are told the real reason for Peter's vision. Peter tells Cornelius that "God has shown me that I should call no person defiled or ritually unclean." It is made clear by this verse and the context - Peter received the vision just after the Gentile Cornelius was told by an angel to seek Peter out - that the purpose of Peter's vision was to show Jewish believers that the fullness of God's Kingdom is available even unto the Gentiles. Paul later castigates Christian Judaizers for trying to force the Hebrew traditions of ceremonial cleanliness on Christian believers, so we know that the vision also freed Christians from Old Testament ceremonial laws. The problem with arguing from this passage is that theologically-motivated vegetarians are not falsely teaching believers that animals are ritually unclean. We recognize that no animals are unclean for Christians to eat, and that the Levitical laws relating to ceremonial cleanliness have been overturned. Christian vegans and vegetarians argue that eating meat is wrong because killing animals is a bad thing (among other reasons) and we are certainly never told in Scripture that this is false. Instead, we see in a number of places that God truly cares for animals. The purpose of Acts 10 was clearly not to encourage Christians to eat meat, and never in Scripture is it implied that it was. And, as before, even if this passage clearly and definitively proved that Christians are permitted to eat meat, it does not follow that Christians can eat just any meat, no matter how depraved and abysmal the methods of acquiring it.

## **Conclusion**

By refusing to support the torture and slaughter of innocent creatures we affirm the goodness of God's creation and the roles that He has given us as caretakers of the Earth. Moreover, by taking a strong stance against animal suffering and death we affirm the badness of sin and the high cost paid on the Cross in atonement for humanity. In maintaining a vegan ethic, we can live a holy life of self-sacrifice, laying down our own preferences for the flavor of animal products for the sake of our compassionate and merciful King who cares about the individual lives of each and every one of His creatures. Living a godly life requires that we live like the God whose "justice is like the highest mountains" and "fairness like the deepest sea;" the God who will forever "preserve mankind and the animal kingdom". Christian veganism is a beautiful spiritual discipline and a holy manifestation of love and compassion. It seems that those who follow Christ ought to take up radical His position as "the Good Shepherd" in the world and genuinely care for those helpless creatures and persons that depend on us for their happiness and survival. We should be rallying in support of industrial reform that makes earth look more like Heaven - more like God intended it to look like from the beginning—and ought to

advocate for laws and policies that make the systematic destruction of lives, livelihood, and the environment impossible. Such advocacy starts with us and our own purchases. How will you work toward decreasing suffering in the world?