

Living Toward the Peaceable Kingdom: Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation¹

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Introduction

Though stewardship of the non-human animal kingdom is one of the primary responsibilities accorded to human beings in the Christian creation narrative, the question of how best to respect and to honor the creatures under our care is one that Christians too often neglect to ask. This omission is especially tragic, given the overwhelming evidence of fallenness in the social and commercial practices that presently govern our relationships to animals. The most egregious of these practices is industrial agriculture or “factory farming”—an industry that Pope Benedict XVI has condemned as the “degrading of living creatures to a commodity.”

While many have elected to boycott factory-farmed meat as a response to the injustices of modern agribusiness, there are serious questions as to whether one can consistently uphold the principles that motivate this boycott merely by abstaining from eating animals’ bodies. After all, the commodification of animals by factory agribusiness is hardly limited to the production of meat; to be sure, the conditions under which confined laying hens produce eggs, and factory dairy cows produce milk are very often worse than those in which “meat” animals are raised. In addition to the suffering of laying hens and milking cows, moreover, the egg and dairy industries are responsible for the suffering of untold millions of sentient creatures who are the unwanted byproducts of their endeavors. Male chicks, since they will never produce eggs, are ground up alive, or discarded in dumpsters and left to starve or suffocate. Male calves, since they will never produce milk, are sold into feed lots where they await the fate of becoming low-grade ground beef, or peddled to the veal industry, where they will be confined in tiny stalls and deprived of exercise and a proper diet.

If concerns about animal cruelty are sufficient to motivate one to boycott factory-farmed meat, then, it is difficult to see why they should fail to motivate one to boycott factory-farmed eggs and dairy as well. Furthermore, given that animals suffer miserable lives and painful deaths at the hands of the clothing, entertainment, and commercial research industries, there is good reason for those concerned about animal exploitation to think that dietary changes alone may not be enough. Indeed, such persons have good reason to consider not just a vegetarian diet, but a vegan lifestyle: a commitment to living, inasmuch as possible, without consuming (or supporting the industries that produce) meat, eggs, dairy, animal by-products, leather, fur, animal-tested consumer products, and forms of entertainment that exploit animals such as sport fishing and hunting, circuses, and rodeos.

For those who already see animal exploitation as a grave moral evil, such considerations may be enough to prompt the conviction that living more compassionately in some of the above ways is a moral duty. But for others, including (I would suggest) the large majority of Christians, a commitment to compassionate living toward animals may seem unduly precious or even perverse. One can imagine their protest: “Given the myriad human problems and environmental crises pressing in from all sides—well, if you’ll pardon the omnivorous metaphor, don’t we have

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bigger fish to fry?” My suggestion in this paper is that, even if we do, there is good reason to think that a suitably holistic commitment to compassionate living, in addition to providing an important and compelling witness to the evils of animal exploitation, can accommodate the frying of many of these putatively larger figurative fish as well.

For though the question of how one lives toward animals may at first appear far removed from the most pressing problems of our age, a closer look reveals that our seemingly trivial daily decisions concerning animal products have disturbing consequences not just for billions of non-human animals, but for the food, commerce, and education systems of developing countries, the dignity of the human workforce that brings animal products to market, the integrity of rural communities here and abroad, the health of an increasingly obese and diseased human population, the viability and accessibility of the healthcare systems that treat these ills, the sustainability of the world’s non-renewable natural resources, and even the hastening of global climate change. The ways in which we currently use animals, it turns out, have profound implications for all three of our conference themes: the environment, economics, and equity (both as the equitable distribution and use of resources, and the equitable treatment of fellow creatures, human and non-human alike).

In view of these concerns, it has become increasingly clear that—far from being a trivial matter of personal preference—the question of how we choose to eat pertains directly to our calling to be good stewards of God’s creation. Indeed, if it is the renewal rather than the unmaking of creation that Christians profess to serve, we must address ourselves with more honesty and conviction to the moral and spiritual significance of eating. My interest here is to explore the prospect of compassionate eating as a form of engaged Christian discipleship *vis-à-vis* a surprisingly wide spectrum of spiritual, moral, and practical problems that affect all aspects of creation—human, animal, and environmental. In a nutshell, I argue that compassionate eating, though not morally required of all Christians at all places and times, is a symbolically significant and practically efficacious spiritual discipline through which one may live in faithful anticipation of the once and future “peaceable kingdom” described in Christian creation and redemption narratives.

My argument to this end proceeds in three steps. First, I briefly explain what I take the phrase “compassionate eating” to mean in the context of this paper. Second, I lay out my strategy for understanding compassionate eating as a Christian spiritual discipline in the broader context of the Reformed and Anabaptist visions of Christian discipleship that have shaped the strategy. Third and finally, I elucidate how this “Reformed Anabaptist” approach to compassionate eating may help us to witness, conscientiously resist, and model faithful Christian responses to a surprising array of problems that degrade the integrity of God’s creation.

I. Compassionate Eating: Preliminary Considerations

For the purposes of this paper, I will use the phrase “compassionate eating” as a collective term for various intentional approaches to eating which seek to be mindful of the best interests of the whole of creation (human, animal, and environmental) when purchasing and consuming food. Insofar as my leading goal in this address is to rally Christian concern around the issue of compassionate eating in general rather than to defend one specific approach to it (for instance, patronizing more humane farmers, or vegetarianism, or veganism), I am deliberately leaving the phrase “compassionate eating” open to interpretation. However different these various approaches may be in their details, they all concur that factory-farming is a woeful miscarriage

of human responsibility that has devastating moral and practical consequences. In the spirit of full disclosure, I will admit to a strong personal conviction that the best philosophical arguments for compassionate eating support veganism, but I will not argue to that conclusion here. Moreover, as I intimated above, I will not argue that compassionate eating is morally required of all Christians in all places and times. I readily admit that compassionate eating may be unreasonably difficult or impossible in cases where the most basic material conditions of human flourishing are unmet, or where the requisite knowledge and availability of healthful compassionate alternatives is lacking.

Before anyone gets too comfortable, however, I should add that I will be proceeding under the general assumption that “to whom much is given, much is expected”, and that, more specifically, as education and affluence increase, so too does the moral urgency of taking a stand on these issues. While I will not pursue the point here, my intuition is that it is entirely plausible to believe that some Christians, perhaps many, are morally required to be vegans. Indeed, it is this intuition, at least in part, that prompted me, against strong inclinations, to adopt veganism as an Anabaptist Christian philosopher with the means, the information, the access to affordable, sustainable alternatives, and the communities of support and accountability that are necessary both to nurture such a commitment and to chasten it when the temptations to pride, legalism, judgmentalism, or utopianism inevitably surface.

It is in full awareness of these potentially pernicious aspects of alternative eating that I wish to frame my paper in view of theologian Stephen Webb’s injunction to Christians to find a way of talking about compassionate eating “that [does] not lapse into legalism or utopianism.”² On Webb’s view, an authentically Christian acknowledgment of both the uniqueness of human beings in the creational order and the pervasiveness of human sin sits ill with the agenda of the contemporary animal rights movement, which he claims “blurs the line between humans and animals” and is “utopian (as well as Pelagian) in its optimism about our ability to change the world.”³ While Webb’s portrait of the animal rights movement is painted in strokes a bit too broad for my taste, I agree with him that a persuasive argument for compassionate Christian eating should neither devalue human beings in order to valorize animals, nor expect too much of fallen humanity’s efforts to change the world. As I develop my spiritual disciplinary strategy for motivating compassionate eating, then, I will attempt to accommodate these concerns.

II. The Strategy in Theory: Toward a “Reformed Anabaptist” Approach to Eating

It is perhaps all too expectable, given my status as a Mennonite teaching at Calvin College, that this strategy is cobbled together from Reformed and Anabaptist insights into the character of Christian discipleship. In order to get this strategy off the ground, I’ll borrow some terminology from Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*.⁴ According to Wolterstorff, “to be a Christian is to be fundamentally committed to being a Christ-follower.” Since Christ “was the principal witness, the decisive agent, and the one who gave the most lucid evidence” of God’s work to bring the fallen world into accord with his creational intentions, one’s commitment to following Christ, Wolterstorff maintains, “ought to be actualized by taking up in a decisively ultimate fashion God’s call to share in the task of being witness, agent, and evidence

² See, among other places, in Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating*, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001.

³ Stephen H. Webb, “Theology from the Pet Side Up: A Christian Agenda for NOT Saving the World”, <http://www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=171>.

⁴ All Wolterstorff citations are drawn from chapter 10 of *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, 71-75.

of the coming of his kingdom.” To sum up, as witnesses, we are called to proclaim that God is working to renew the world; as agents, we are called to do what we can to bring this renewal about; and as evidences, we are called to provide indications in the here and now of what the coming kingdom will be like.

Of course, for fallen human beings, there is always a wide gulf separating what Wolterstorff calls our “actual Christian commitment”—the way in which our commitment to Christ-following is realized *in fact*, from our “authentic Christian commitment”—the way in which this commitment *ought* to be realized. For fallen human beings, then, making progress as disciples of Christ will involve acknowledging this gulf between who we are and who we ought to be, and doing what we can, however imperfectly and incompletely, to narrow this gap.

This is where spiritual disciplines come into the picture. For the purposes of this paper, we can understand a spiritual discipline as a repetitive daily practice that is undertaken in a faithful, albeit fallen, attempt to narrow the gap between our actual and authentic Christian commitment. Ideally, when undertaken in the right spirit and for the right reasons, a spiritual discipline serves two essential purposes simultaneously. It serves a critical purpose by reminding the practitioner of her fallenness—of the gulf, that is, that separates who she is as a Christ-follower from who she ought to be. But at the same time, the discipline serves a constructive purpose by propelling her, through the practice itself, toward a more authentic realization of the Christ-following to which she is called.

In suggesting that compassionate eating can be put to work as a Christian spiritual exercise, I am contending that a daily commitment to remembering and taking care to reduce the hidden costs of the food one consumes may serve, on some important fronts at least, to narrow the gulf between the Christ-follower that one in fact *is*, and the Christ-follower that one *ought* to be. The *critical* moment of this discipline is the reminder that each and every one of us makes decisions each and every day that contribute to the unnecessary suffering and death of God’s human and non-human creatures and to the degradation of God’s world. The *constructive* moment of the discipline is that the daily seeking out of less cruel, more socially and ecologically responsible choices—even though it can never extricate us from the web of fallen structures and practices in which we are always already entangled—nevertheless serves to move us toward a more authentic witness to the work of renewal that God has promised to carry out, a more engaged agency in the sharing of this work, and a more compelling, if still woefully veiled, demonstration of what the world might be like when suffering, death, and degradation are no more.

If this Reformed rhetoric is starting to sound too triumphalistic, however, allow me to temper it somewhat by cashing out the Anabaptist aspect of my strategy before I enumerate the specific problems that I claim the witness, agency, and evidence of a more compassionate diet are well suited to address. To do so, I will draw on James Halteman’s account of what he dubs “the radical calling view” of pacifism, and then extrapolate from it a parallel radical calling view of compassionate eating.⁵ As Halteman sees it, Christians who practice the discipline of pacifism have a two-fold calling that engages them, in different but complementary ways, in the work of two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. The first task of the Christian pacifist is to point toward the kingdom of God by modeling “the radical, nonviolent, alternative way of life taught in scripture.” The second task is what Halteman describes as an engaged, active “leaning against” the structures of the worldly kingdom “to persuade them to be the best

⁵ All Halteman citations are drawn from “Two Routes to a Pacifist Position,” *The Mennonite* (a semimonthly magazine published by the Mennonite Church USA), January 2, 2007. One may read the article in its entirety at http://www.themennonite.org/pdf/magazine_pdf_145.pdf.

they can be, given the fallen world in which they operate.” In performing this second task, the Christian pacifist has no illusions that the world at large will (or even can) come around to pacifism. Her hope is rather to push for incremental change on the margins through a combination of propheticism and pragmatism—her voice is prophetic in that it calls the worldly kingdom to a higher standard, but pragmatic in that she realizes that the best the world can do may be, for instance, a just war position. “Far from being aloof and separatist,” Halteman argues, “the pacifist with the radical calling view is engaged and has a prophetic voice in the social order.”

Something similar is the case, I claim, for the Christian who practices the model of compassionate eating I am advocating here. The goal of her discipline is not some this-worldly utopia, nor is her primary disposition toward those who do not share her calling one of separatist judgment. Her two-fold aim, rather, is to live as faithfully as she can toward the peaceable kingdom in which the original harmony amongst human beings, animals and the natural world will be restored, and in so doing, to lean against the structures of the worldly kingdom (of which she herself remains a part) in hopes of raising the world’s consciousness and advancing whatever modest improvements to the system might be possible under fallen conditions. For me personally, taking up these tasks has involved the prophetic commitment of practicing and advocating a vegan lifestyle, and the pragmatic commitment of working closely with people and organizations who do not share my vegan commitments, but who are nonetheless committed to, for instance, reforming factory agribusiness, developing smaller scale, more humane alternatives for animal husbandry, and legislating stricter welfare standards in animal research.

In sketching this admittedly broad strokes account of what one might call a “Reformed Anabaptist” approach to compassionate eating as a Christian spiritual discipline, I have attempted to locate a mean between the two extremes of triumphalism on the one hand and disengaged separatism on the other. On this model, compassionate eating is a symbolic commitment to living in hope that one day the peaceable kingdom will obtain, even though our efforts to approximate it in this world will inevitably fall woefully short of the mark. Against this backdrop, I now turn to a discussion of the surprising array of human, animal, and environmental problems in respect to which this approach to eating may aid the Christian disciple in her striving to become a more authentic witness, agent, and evidence of the coming kingdom.

III. The Strategy in Practice: Toward Holistic Care of Creation

In teasing out the implications of pursuing one’s authentic Christian commitment, Wolterstorff maintains that this pursuit “involves treating nature with delight and respect and acting in solidarity with the socially oppressed.” At first glance, this injunction may seem to have little to do with one’s disposition toward the use of animals for human purposes. On a closer look, however, one finds a burgeoning body of evidence that the use of animal products, in our contemporary circumstances anyway, is harder to square than one might expect with any feasible interpretation of caring for nature or exhibiting compassion for the oppressed. It merits mention that this evidence is surfacing from virtually all relevant corridors—theology, philosophy, animal psychology, physiology, and neurology, environmental research, medical research, experimental science, social science, journalism, and law.

While I cannot hope to present this evidence in a comprehensive fashion here, I will briefly summarize seven areas of concern that indicate the wide range of human, animal, and environmental woes linked to the industrial farming of animals for food. What I hope will become clear is that, even if we were to believe—against overwhelming evidence to the contrary—that animals themselves are unworthy of moral consideration (akin, perhaps, to

ambulatory middle sized dry goods), we would still have a variety of compelling reasons, thoroughly grounded in the mandate to care for creation, to reduce or even boycott the consumption of animal products. To put the point in a different way, we don't even need to care about animals in order to conclude that industrial animal farming is a miscarriage of our stewardship of God's world.

Animal Suffering—If we choose to deny the moral significance of animal suffering, however, we do so at the peril of turning our backs on the scriptural record of God's original intentions for creation and God's plans for redeeming it (as I discussed this afternoon). Christian theologian Andrew Linzey goes so far as to say that Christ's gospel is for every creature. "To stand for Jesus," Linzey argues, "is to stand for a ministry of reconciliation to the whole of creation [...], to stand for active compassion for the weak [against exploitation by the powerful], to stand for the Christ-like innocence of animals against the intrinsic evil of cruelty [...], to stand for animals as God's creatures, against all purely humanistic or utilitarian accounts of animals as things, commodities, resources, here for us."⁶

In failing to be moved by animal suffering, moreover, we must also deny the validity of contemporary scientific accounts of the kinds of beings "food" animals are. Non-human animals used for food are sentient beings who are fully capable of feeling pain and experiencing psychological trauma. The structure of their bodies is significantly similar to ours, their nervous systems transmit pain in the same ways, they manifest similar types of behavior when in pain or under stress, they care about members of their own species and experience significant trauma when denied such company, and like us, they go out of their way to maximize their own goods and to minimize their own discomfort. None of this is to say, I should point out, that their suffering is on a moral or psychological par with human suffering; but please notice that it doesn't need to be on a par with human suffering in order to count as something bad, even as something horrendously evil—something, in any case, that self-respecting, God-appointed stewards of creation should take great pains to minimize whenever and wherever possible.

That animals suffer greatly in intensive farming operations is beyond reasonable doubt. They are debeaked, tail-docked, dehorned, branded, and castrated without anesthetic; they live in crowded, filthy conditions that deny them the ability to exercise their most basic instincts; they are given feed that their bodies are not meant to digest, forcing them to experience perpetual discomfort and unnatural obesity; for transport to slaughter they are packed like sardines into trucks that expose them to extreme weather conditions; finally, they are killed—unnaturally and without ceremony—often while still fully conscious.⁷ Since medical research has discredited the popular claim that animal products are indispensable for good nutrition (quite the contrary, as we shall see below), this egregious suffering and death is entirely unnecessary in the overwhelming majority of cases, unless one is prepared to interpret mere aesthetic enjoyment on the part of human beings as a sufficiently weighty countervailing good.

Poor Environmental Stewardship: Animal husbandry in its modern industrial form has devastating consequences for the environment. It requires wasteful allocation of land to grow grain to feed animals (when it could be feeding people) and monocropping degrades the arability

⁶ Andrew Linzey, *Animal Gospel*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 11-18.

⁷ Some of the most detailed accounts of what goes on in animal factories are cobbled together from the industry standard manuals of the very people who own and operate these factories. See, for example, Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*. For other compelling accounts of what goes on in animal factories, see Tom Regan, *Empty Cages: Facing the Challenge of Animal Rights*; Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, The Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*; and Gail Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse*.

of the soil; it requires astronomical amounts of water (both for animal care, and to raise the corn and soybeans fed to animals), and equally surprising amounts of fossil fuel for herbicides, pesticides, and transportation; it generates massive amounts of waste (manure) and greenhouse gasses (cow flatulence produces some 20% of the methane), and animal and chemical waste runoff causes air and water pollution. Shocking as it may seem, a United Nations report released in November 2006 found that “cattle-rearing generates more global warming greenhouse gases, as measured in CO2 equivalent, than transportation.”⁸

And global warming is just the tip of the iceberg. Consider this outtake from the latest book by Peter Singer and Jim Mason on *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*:

“The editors of World Watch Magazine, the journal of the Washington, DC-based World Watch Institute that follows global environmental issues, have noted that the “seemingly small issue of individual consumption of meat” has now become central to discussions of sustainability. This is because, they wrote, “as environmental science has advanced, it has become apparent that the human appetite for animal flesh is a driving force behind virtually every major category of environmental damage now threatening the human future—deforestation, erosion, fresh water scarcity, air and water pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, social injustice, the destabilization of communities, and the spread of disease.”⁹

The scientists at World Watch are hardly alone in their dire assessment of the situation.¹⁰ Dr. Michael Jacobson and the staff of the Center for Science in the Public Interest recently reported the following statistics in *Six Arguments for a Greener Diet*.

- Feed grains require five times as much irrigation as fruits and vegetables.
- It takes 7 lbs of corn to add 1 pound of weight to feed lot cattle (and some of this weight gain is not edible meat).
- 19% of all methane is emitted by cattle and other livestock. Livestock generate an amount of methane that promotes about as much global warming as the release of carbon dioxide from 33 million automobiles. Methane is 23 times as potent as an equal amount of carbon dioxide.
- 66 percent of grain ends up as livestock feed
- 22 billion lbs of fertilizer per year is need to grow feed grains for American livestock.
- 17 trillion gallons of irrigation water is used annually to produce feed for U.S. livestock.¹¹

⁸<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=20772&Cr=global&Cr1=environment#> (United Nations News Center)

⁹ Singer and Mason, *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*, Rodale, 2006.

¹⁰ Other helpful books in the ever-burgeoning literature on the negative impact of animal agriculture on the environment include Andrew Kimbrell, *The Fatal Harvest Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture*, Sausalito, CA: Island Press, 2002; Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, New York: Penguin, 2006; and John Robbins, *The Food Revolution: How Your Diet Can Help Save Your Life and Our World*, San Francisco: Conari Press, 2001.

¹¹ Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D., *Six Arguments for a Greener Diet: How a More Plant Based Diet Could Save Your Health and the Environment*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2006.

So is there reason to think that our dietary choices have implications for the environment? Michael Jacobson puts it like this: “In terms of global warming, eating a typical American diet instead of an all-plant diet has a greater impact than driving a Toyota Camry instead of a gas-frugal Toyota Prius.”¹²

Global Injustice: The implications of animal factory agribusiness for the global poor are no less disturbing. International companies exploit arable land in the developing world (which could be used to grow food for the undernourished people who live there) in order to grow grain to feed animals that only the richest countries in the world can afford to eat. Furthermore, in order to keep grain prices low, the government pays billions of dollars per year in subsidies which make it near to impossible for the global poor to make a living growing crops (i.e., the 20% of people in the world who live off of less than what a \$1/day would buy in the USA, and the 50% that live off of less than \$2). *The Economist*, *The Lancet* and other publications have estimated that discontinuing the subsidies and reallocating these resources more responsibly could save millions of people a year from unnecessary suffering and death. As John Robbins notes in *The Food Revolution*, those numbers are on the rise.

“In 2000, the United Nations Commission on Nutrition Challenges of the 21st Century said that unless we make major changes, 1 billion children will be permanently handicapped over the next 20 years due to inadequate caloric intake. The first step to averting this tragedy, according to the commission, is to encourage human consumption of traditional grains, fruits, and vegetables.”¹³

In their book *Good News For All Creation: Vegetarianism as Christian Stewardship*, Stephen R. Kaufman and Nathan Braun express the same concern in a way that might appeal more directly to people of faith:

“Jesus preached, “For I was hungry and you gave me food...as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:35, 40). While approximately 1.1 billion of the world’s people are considered overweight, an equal number are underfed and malnourished. Tens of millions die annually from starvation or disease related to malnutrition, mostly children. Yet worldwide in 1998, 37 percent of all harvested grain was fed to animals being raised for slaughter; in the United States that figure was 66 percent. Meat wastes between 66 and 92 percent of grains’ proteins and calories. While political and social factors significantly impact world hunger, meat-based diets only contributed to the problem.”¹⁴

While consideration of these first three problem areas alone is sufficient to give sense to my claim that compassionate eating addresses human, animal, and environmental concerns alike, there are four other areas of concern that merit serious consideration, though I will mention them only briefly to round out the picture.

¹² Ibid., x.

¹³ John Robbins, *The Food Revolution*, 291.

¹⁴ Stephen R. Kaufman and Nathan Braun, *Good News For All Creation: Vegetarianism as Christian Stewardship*, Cleveland: Vegetarian Advocates Press, 2004, 19-20.

Exploitation of the Disenfranchised: Factory farms and slaughterhouses are among the most dangerous and degrading places to work (not to mention to live): the stench is unbearable, the work environment is filthy and full of peril (physically and psychologically), the acts of cruelty that workers must perform are horrific, and these operations prey on illegal aliens and other disenfranchised persons who have limited employment options.

Local Injustice: Industrial agriculture has destroyed rural communities, putting family farmers either out of business or into servitude to large, unscrupulous corporations who take virtually all of the profits and none of the risks; the result is that land which, when wisely stewarded, can support the growth of hundreds of species of plants (a practice that has a regenerative effect on the soil) is now used exclusively to grow genetically modified corn and soybeans to feed factory farmed animals.

Poor Stewardship of Personal Health: The most current scientific and nutritional findings provide substantive evidence that eating animal products is a direct cause of “diseases of affluence” such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, breast and intestinal cancers, Alzheimers, and many others; meanwhile, the same studies show that the consumption of a whole foods, plant based diet not only reduces one’s risk of getting these illnesses, but can mitigate and even reverse them when they’ve already taken hold.

Poor Stewardship of Public Resources: Personal health crises lead to public health crises, and this is proving true in the United States, where we spend hundreds of billions of dollars annually on medication and invasive surgical procedures to treat “diseases of affluence” that can be prevented by the more responsible consumption of a whole foods, plant based diet.

In conclusion, the primary significance of my account of compassionate eating vis-à-vis these problems is its practitioner’s symbolic commitment to seeking authenticity, in imitation of Christ, as a witness, agent, and evidence of the coming kingdom. At the end of the day, I contend, it is the faithfulness of one’s discipleship rather than its impact that matters most. Nevertheless, if I had more time, I could say a lot more about the many individual and social goods (dare I say fruits of the spirit?) that are generated by the discipline of compassionate eating: increased awareness of the complex relationships between parts of creation and the whole; increased compassion for all sentient life; more deliberate stewardship of personal resources; increased personal health; the opening of new markets for less cruel, more sustainable alternatives; the forging of a bond of trust with the people who grow one’s food; increased patience in waiting for (and increased delight in savoring) natural foods that defy the immediate gratification of the grocery store; increased imagination and creativity (gleaned through the process of learning to put compassion before convenience in a world that doesn’t always make it easy to do so); the experience of tighter-knit community with friends (since collective cooking and eating substantially defray costs). The list could go on. Thus, whether or not one succeeds in changing the world on a grand scale, the personal rewards of compassionate eating (both spiritual and practical) are many; as Bono says in the U2 song *Rejoice*: “maybe I can’t change the world, but I can change the world in me.” This rejoicing in the bounty of discipleship, it seems to me, is an important part of what it means to live, as ancient Christians were fond of saying, *in Christ*.

As one assesses these considerations, the thought will no doubt arise: “need one go as far as boycotting animal products entirely to tap into these goods?” No. One *need* not. One can make important strides toward them by adopting marginal, incremental changes: giving up various foods for prescribed periods of time, buying cage-free eggs and humanely-raised meats from

small family farmers, going vegetarian, purchasing alternatives to leather and wool when possible, etc. But for some Christians, these incremental changes will not be enough. Such people will not be able to push back the question of why they are spending more money for products that are proven to be less healthy than plant based alternatives, and that—though better than their factory farmed counterparts—are nonetheless part of the problem. Small animal husbandry operations, after all, are usually dependent on the industrial system in some way for stock, feed, and the absorption of byproducts (unwanted calves, for instance) and they are always implicated in the business of depriving sentient non-human animals of their most basic interest (life) in order to serve, in the large majority of cases, the most trivial interests of human beings (aesthetic enjoyment). These sorts of Christians are likely to see veganism as the preferred form of discipleship in respect to this constellation of issues. Like all Christians, though, they will do well to remember that moral perfectionism is the enemy of moral progress, that judgment is God’s business, and that the planks in their own eyes, rather than the specks in the eyes of others, should be their primary concern.

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