

Why Might Christians Be Leaving Turkey Off the Table This Christmas?

From [SARX: For All God's Creatures](#)

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Although eating turkey has become synonymous with Christmas in the UK, could revelations about the appalling conditions in which these birds are raised lead us to reconsider how we celebrate this Christian tradition? With these revelations hitting the headlines, this season might present an opportunity for Christians to reflect on whether turkeys belong on the Christmas dinner table.

For Christians, Christmas is the time to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and heralds a time of “good news” and “great joy” (Luke 2). It is when we rejoice over the coming of our saviour, the “Prince of Peace”, to establish a kingdom of “justice” and “righteousness” (Isaiah 9). If one were to ponder other words in connection with Christmas, we might think of “nativity”, “carols”, “hope”, “rejoicing”, “light” and, above all, “love”.

So how has the word “turkey” slipped in with the above words to become commonly identified with Christmas? There is certainly no mention of eating these birds in scripture. Indeed, turkey was not consumed in the UK until the 16th century, and it was not until the Victorian era that this practice became fairly widespread.

If the consuming of turkeys at Christmas is a comparatively recent practice, even more modern are the ways in which turkeys are farmed. The era of factory farming in Britain began in the 1940’s and has since grown at a staggering rate. In the UK this Christmas, over 10 million turkeys will be killed, over 90% of

these birds will have spent their lives being intensively reared in cramped industrial sheds, with up to 25,000 birds confined to just one unit.

The average weight of a wild male turkey is around 7.5kg, but farmers artificially breed them to reach 25kg. The poor birds struggle to cope with this unnatural weight and they often suffer from agonising leg disorders, joint degeneration and heart disease as a result.



Turkeys suffering in an intensive factory farm. © Jo-Anne McArthur

The industrial units in which turkeys are raised frequently lack appropriate environmental enrichment, causing extreme stress and the development of unnatural behaviours such as cannibalism and feather-pecking.

These birds, which could have lived to around 10 years of age in the wild, are taken for slaughter after only 8 to 26 weeks. This traumatic process involves these animals being crammed into trucks and driven to the slaughterhouse where they suffer terrible stress before having their throats cut.

There have also been reports of appalling abuses at turkey farms. The animal charity [Viva! has released shocking footage](#) from an undercover investigation into three British intensive turkey farms who supply major supermarkets. Their investigations reveal shocking scenes of suffering and cruelty.

In light of the suffering millions of turkeys will experience in the run up to Christmas, why might Christians have particular reasons to think carefully before choosing to celebrate the birth of Jesus by consuming one of these birds?

Firstly, Christians have always been mindful to not conform to the ways of the world (Romans 12:2) and avoid being deceived by human tradition (Colossians 2:10).

In contemporary culture, we are bombarded by adverts urging us to enjoy eating animals, particularly at Christmas. However people of faith have good reason to scrutinize whether such adverts authentically reflect Biblical values or distort the true meaning of Christmas.

The Bible is explicit in its condemnation of animal cruelty as wickedness and incompatible with living a righteous life (Proverbs 12:10). In light of this, and the appalling cruelty involved in the farming of turkeys, might we want to *think very carefully* before going along with the secular tradition of eating turkey and question how we are to marry this suffering with celebrating the birth of Christ?



Turkeys being roughly loaded onto a truck before slaughter © Jo-Anne McArthur

Secondly, Christians have a unique perspective on what turkeys *actually are*.

It is true that turkeys are intelligent, social and affectionate birds and have some striking characteristics. In the wild, turkeys live in groups of several close-knit families. As well as “gobbling” turkeys can produce up to 28 different calls including purring sounds when they are content. These soft, rolling calls are also made so that everyone within the flock stays together.

Yet, as well as being fascinating animals, scripture informs us that they are *beloved* animals. Whilst the secular world might treat turkeys as mere products to be consumed, the Bible teaches us that animals belong to God and exist for His glory:

“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” (Psalm 24:1)

“for every animal of the forest is mine and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains and the insects in the fields are mine.” (Psalm 50: 10-11)

Further to this, the Bible tells us that God’s intentions for animals are highly positive. Scripture informs us that animals are blessed and declared good (Genesis 1:24-25), called into covenant, (Genesis 9:8), delighted in by God (Psalm 104:31), called to worship (Psalm 148:7-13) and redeemed by Christ (Colossians 1:20).

This remarkably positive view of animals may clash with much of contemporary culture which assumes that animals are “ours” to use as we please. The Biblical perspective gives us all the more reason to question the status quo of eating turkeys at Christmas.



Farm Sanctuary hosts an annual *Celebration for the Turkeys*, an autumn event that draws hundreds of visitors for a weekend of education, comradery, a communal Thanksgiving meal, and time spent with rescued animals. © Jo-Anne McArthur

Thirdly, Christians have a calling to be peacemakers.

The animal rights charity PETA has recently released its [first-ever Christmas advert](#). This short animation ends with the words “Peace on Earth begins at home. Have a vegan Christmas.” Although PETA is a secular charity, this call to peace is steeped in Biblical tradition.

When angels visited the shepherds to announce the birth of Christ, they proclaimed glory to God and peace on earth (Luke 2:14). Christ, the “Lord of Peace” not only gives peace to his followers (2 Thessalonians 3:16) but calls them to seek and strive for peace (1 Peter 3:11 and Hebrews 12:14).

Choosing a vegan meal this Christmas is an opportunity to recapture this call to peace and witness to the in-breaking Messianic reign of the God who desires there to be peace between all His creatures and promises to bring this about at the completion of creation.

With an enormous number of festive [meat-free recipes available online](#) and the [largest-ever selection of vegan options in the shops](#), it has never been easier to choose a delicious, cruelty-free alternative for our Christmas meals.

This Christmas, let us take the first step to realising peace on earth by ensuring that there is peace on our dinner tables.

Written by Sarx staff writer with special thanks to Dr Philip J. Sampson and for his research and guidance.