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Are Some Foods Unfit To Eat?

Are the Old Testament dietary laws out-dated? Should Christians eat pork and shellfish? Is it Sin? Here's what God's Word has to say.

by James McBride

Served a delicious-looking pork roast, or a plate of mussels or oysters, or a tasty ham sandwich - has it ever crossed your mind that there could be *anything wrong* in eating them? A strange question, perhaps, in a world where anything that moves is eaten somewhere! But it's one that sometimes puzzles Christians.

Sooner or later a Christian will encounter the Bible's "dietary laws". These are a string of foods which God instructed Israel not to eat, and which are listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Do these 'Old Testament' restrictions on what may be eaten apply to Christians today? Are they merely 'ceremonial' - and "done away in Christ"? Or is it still *sin* to eat them?

Let's examine the evidence from Scripture - both Old and New Testament - to find God's mind on these questions. Many Christian writers claim that certain New Testament texts annul the original food laws, making them obsolete. Others argue that these laws continue to this day. Later we will look at the opposing views.

The food laws, of course, are in Scripture linked to the so-called "laws of uncleanness". 'Clean' animals were suitable for both sacrifice, *and* for food. The 'unclean' were prohibited for both. But were these laws of uncleanness first introduced by Moses?

Before The Flood

It's important to realize that these laws of uncleanness did not originate with "the Law of Moses" around 1500BC. They are not 'Jewish' but an inheritance *for all mankind*. In fact, they were known to Noah eight hundred years before Moses! Read Genesis 7:1-5: "Take with you [into the ark]" God instructed Noah, "seven of every kind of *clean animal*...and two of every kind of *unclean animal*". That is, before the Flood the notion of "clean and unclean" was already understood. From the early dawn of history a clear distinction is made. Some creatures were "clean". Some were not. Some were for eating and some were not. Some animals were defined by the Creator as suitable for

sacrifice, and some were not.

Abel sacrificed "the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions" (Gen 4:4) and - as with sacrifices in general - it's likely that he would have eaten a portion of it as part of the "sacrificial fellowship" with God. These sacrifices were of the 'clean' animals only.

Indeed, anciently such a distinction was made by the high caste Hindu and the Egyptian priest. The latter, for example, refused to eat the flesh of any animal that had uncloven hooves (e.g. the pig or the camel). Clearly the knowledge of a distinct difference between what was edible and what wasn't goes back to the shared beginnings of human history.

From the Flood until Moses, then, the people of God are recorded as eating and sacrificing only the *clean* animals: of the 'flock' - sheep or goat - (Gen 4:4), or cattle (18:7), or birds. Noah, after the Flood "took of every clean beast and of every clean fowl and offered burnt offerings" (ch 8:20). It's logical that, as in later times, these sacrificial foods were also those designed to be eaten.

Within the dietary laws Noah was warned only that he should not eat flesh with the blood still in it. A caution, this, with which any dietician would agree!

Moses later recorded for us what these clean and unclean animals fish, birds and insects are. They have not changed since! However, in a few instances there may be some doubt as to which creature is referred to, though those foods normally used as food are clearly defined. [See box for some common examples].

Merely Ceremonial?

It's well-known - even in our world of hi-tech refrigeration and high standards of hygienic food-handling - that certain foods are likely to cause illness. High on the list of meat with a medical health warning are the so-called "unclean" foods listed in Scripture! As I write, ninety people locally

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are seriously ill because of eating mussels - a kind of scavenger shell-fish that delightedly feeds on raw sewage! In 1990, and again several times since, shell-fish from the east coast of England were banned from the shops for several months because contaminated. Such incidents are not uncommon. Not infrequently they kill. And doctors, of course, frequently prescribe “no pork” to patients for health reasons. Another example is the hare which was, even among the ancient Britons, avoided because of its well-known loathsome disorders!

So anyone who expresses respect for these Bible food laws, is doing himself a favor! Isn't it logical that a God who created man, who loves mankind, will also have given guidance on the best “fuel” for his body? And what to avoid?

In fact, an open-minded study of Scripture forces only one answer to our title question: Yes - some foods *are* unfit to eat! And Christians especially, in whom dwells the Spirit of God, who are His “Temple”, who are Christ's Body, ought to give heed to the Bible's dietary laws!

Of course, it's almost impossible in today's world to avoid the intake of what are known as “unclean meats”. Clearly, to unknowingly eat a portion of pork roast, or swallow a shrimp with the soup, or down a prawn won't exclude us from the Kingdom of God. We are not saved by our works! Nor need we sift every spoonful of soup for particles of pork fat, nor minutely inspect every lettuce leaf for a maggot, nor wonder what's in the toothpaste! Wrote Paul. “For the Kingdom of God does not consist in eating and drinking...” (Romans 14:17).

Consequences

Before God created man (the pinnacle and purpose of the material creation) He made His creation fitted to man's physical and psychic constitution. Man fits perfectly into the grand scheme of the fundamental laws of the Universe. That ‘set-up’ includes gravity, the laws of motion etc. Man to survive has to conform to these laws!

In Eden man's diet - perhaps for environmental considerations - was largely vegetarian (Genesis 1:29-30). But because of sin, the ensuing disruption to the seasons and the curse on agriculture (ch 3:17-19), certain plants were, or became, inedible. Hence there is today a wide range of plants which experience shows are unfit to eat - or even poisonous. Some mushrooms, for example are notoriously deadly. Similarly - and not quite so clear through our experience - certain *animals* are not fit to eat. These God has defined for us in His dietary laws.

To transgress the laws of gravity or inertia may land you in hospital from a road accident, for example, or falling down stairs. But it doesn't deprive you of eternal life. It is not a sin that necessarily has spiritual consequences! This is, too, the case with the eating of ‘unclean’ meats. There are well-documented physical consequences (including heart disease, cancer, food poisoning etc.). But their inadvertent ingestion *doesn't* lead to the second death. As

the apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians “There is nothing unclean [common] *of itself*” (ch 14:14). In other words, to eat unclean foods has consequences for our health. But it is not - usually - sin!

On the other hand it's also emphasized in Scripture that God gives the Holy Spirit (without which we are not Christ's) *to those who obey Him*: (Acts 5:32). To deliberately and knowingly flout any part of the Law of God instills and encourages an attitude of rebellion which could lead to the quenching from within us of the Spirit of God. That has *real* spiritual consequences! A true Christian constantly says to God “Your will be done”! Whether it hurts or not. God works with those who “tremble” at His Word!

Idolatry

Why, then, do so many who claim to be Christian get so *angry* about this part of God's revelation to man?

Desperately, they search for Bible texts to somehow “get round” God's instruction! For example, Paul's words within his short treatise on idolatry (in I Corinthians 10) are used to justify eating unclean foods when eating out. He said “If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising questions of conscience” (v.27). There you have it! You wouldn't want to embarrass your host (never mind yourself), would you? So with a clear conscience should you just tuck into the juicy pork chop - or the grilled octopus, or frogs legs, or barbecued rat, mouse, snake or dog? (All are relished somewhere in the world!)

Is this what Paul means? Look at the context. He is discussing *idolatry* - that is, any religion divorced from the Word of God. With his avowed attitude of deep respect for God's Law would Paul sanction this major departure from it? He did say, you will recall, “the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12).

Notice his words: “Anything that is sold in the market eat, and ask no questions for conscience sake. If an unbeliever invites you [for dinner!] and you consent to go, eat whatever is put before you, and ask no questions for conscience sake. But, if anyone tells you. ‘This food has been *offered in sacrifice*’, abstain from eating it for the sake of him who warned you, and for conscience sake - I mean his conscience, not your own” (vv25-28).

Best to courteously warn your host ahead of time as to your food preferences - just as the Queen of England does!

Remember that the apostle Paul was writing to Christians whose sole “Scripture” was what we term the Old Testament! His teaching to the Corinthian Church was founded on the writings of the Old Testament. They were thoroughly familiar with the division of food into “clean and unclean”! As Paul wrote to Timothy: “Cling to the truths that you have learnt and of which you are convinced, knowing who your teachers were, and that from infancy *you have known the sacred writings* which are able to

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make you wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (II Timothy 3:14-17).

With their respect for the Old Testament they would take some convincing that Paul was telling them to flaunt God’s Laws! Especially, too, in view of Jesus’ attitude to God’s Law - “I have not come to abolish [the Law and the Prophets]...” (Matthew 5:17).

Anyway, in thirty-five odd years of keeping these food laws I have yet to meet anyone who tells me the roast - clean or unclean - was part of a sacrifice to idols. Nor, I bet, have you!

Peter’s Dilemma

The apostle Peter once faced a dilemma on this matter of clean and unclean. Some *ten years after the resurrection of Jesus* he had a vision of “all kinds of quadrupeds, reptiles and birds” - dogs, cats, horses, frogs, alligators, snakes, spiders etc. - being lowered before him in a huge sheet. A voice said “Rise, Peter, kill and eat”. A shocking command. For as Peter makes clear: “On no account, Lord, for I have never yet [this was, remember, several years after the resurrection!] eaten anything unhallowed or unclean”. (You can read the account in Acts 10.)

As events unfolded, Peter came to understand the point of the vision *all men are equal* in the eyes of God. Regarding salvation, there is neither Jew nor Gentile (vv.28-29). Peter was *not* to consider any *man* (Gk: *anthropos*) “unclean”! He did not say “any *thing*”. In the vision God was telling him that salvation is open to all men. The vision had nothing to do with food!

To make these unclean foods suitable for mankind to eat, their - or man’s - very anatomy and physiology would need restructuring. The digestive tracts of dogs and rats and pigs and oysters and crabs and vultures would have to be totally changed to properly process their flesh to be fit for human consumption. Yet all these unclean creatures are the same today as they were six thousand years ago when they were first created! Where in Scripture has God ‘cleansed’ - indeed changed the very nature of - His long list of prohibited foods?

Holy Meat?

Indeed Paul told Timothy that in our day “some will fall away from the truth, giving heed to deceiving spirits and the teachings of demons” (I Timothy 4:1). That’s a strong warning - and surely one we ought to investigate! What is he referring to? “They insist on abstinence from foods which God has created to be partaken of with thankfulness by those who believe and know the truth”. Clearly some of the brethren were listening to a false teaching of avoiding certain foods which are acceptable in God’s eyes for man to eat. But which? He explains: “for it is made holy *by the Word of God* [the ‘truth’] and by prayer” (v.5).

Now, what foods are “made holy” that is, separated for a particular use - by the Scriptures, the Word of God?

There’s basically only one place to look - and that is Leviticus 11, repeated in Deuteronomy 14? In other words, the “clean” foods. Paul specifically points out that certain substances, *defined by God’s Word*, are set apart for use as food. Some are not. So around 60AD the apostle Paul still hadn’t got the message that Jesus had “made all meats clean”!

Note that Paul calls the false teaching *demonic*. It is today a well-known tenet of the Satan-inspired “New Age” teachings that “all animated life is sacred”. The extension of this is that God dwells in all creatures - and we ought therefore, *for this reason*, to eat only vegetable foods. It is, of course, a Satanic lie! One result, for example, is the populous nation of India, where poverty and malnutrition is widespread largely due to the refusal to kill vermin such as rats and mice - which in consequence devour half the stored grain - or to use cattle for food. Any of them, it is believed, might be *re-incarnated* people, or gods! This false concept is beginning to grip western society!

Did Jesus Change Animal Nature?

But didn’t Jesus “make all foods clean”? This is “quoted” from Mark 7:19 and is often taken to mean that Jesus overturned the Bible dietary laws.

Recall that Jesus constantly upheld the Law of God! But he did, of course, have something to say about “uncleanness”. He blasted the Pharisees for their obsessive pre-occupation with ritually washing the objects they used daily. However, to use this text in Mark 7 to prove that at that precise moment Jesus took it on himself to a) change the nature of animals, or b) change the human digestive system and to c) forever after do away with God’s perfect Laws is a travesty of Scripture!

Let’s read the passage: “And he said to them, Are you also still ignorant? Do you not perceive that what enters into the man from without cannot pollute him? Because it does not reach the intellect [KJV ‘heart’] but passes into the bowels: *which eliminate all foods* [KJV: ‘purging all meats’]”. Late glosses on the text interpreted these words as “This said Jesus, making all meats clean”. But the logical meaning is in connection with the *digestion of food* in the human body”. Notice the view of W. Walsham How in his *Commentary*: “Purging all meats’ - That is cleansing the foods eaten from all that is not suitable for nourishment”. It is a physiological statement as true today as two thousand years ago! The ‘human digestive system eliminates all unwanted roughage. etc.

Jesus, in this passage, goes on to show that the true uncleanness or pollution is “from within, from man’s intellect”: from “vile thoughts, adultery, fornication, murder, theft, avarice wickedness, deceit, etc.” (vv21-23). In other words, man is ‘unclean’ by breaking the Laws of God.

We have seen, then, that right from man’s earliest days there is a God-inspired distinction between foods that are edible and those that aren’t. Indeed in a prophecy for our

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time at the end of this age (v.15) Isaiah relays God's message: "On the whole world the Eternal will pass sentence with his fire and sword. Any who ... eat the flesh of swine, of mice and crawling vermin their rites and devices shall perish by the Eternal's order" (Isaiah 66:15-18 Moffatt).

Clearly God *still* holds the eating of unclean flesh as an abomination! Anciently God's Temple was desecrated by the sacrifice of an unclean animal on the altar. Very soon there will be a Temple (of sorts) again standing in Jerusalem. Again that Temple will be desecrated. Is it possible that the coming Antichrist will enforce the ritual eating of swine's flesh? Possible that once again God's altar will be defiled by the sacrifice of a pig upon it? That a required part of the coming universal religion will be the eating of "the abomination"? If so, then it will surely be *sin* to eat the unclean!

However, in the new Temple which the returned Jesus Christ will construct, all the sacrificial animals conform to the *Laws of Clean and Unclean* (Ezekiel 43 etc.). An instruction to the Priests and Levites who will officiate in those days is "They must teach the people the difference between what is sacred and what is unconsecrated [i.e. ritually], and show them how to distinguish what is unclean and what is clean" [i.e. inherently] (ch 44:23). The former refers to sacrifices, the latter to foods.

This is precisely what we in the Churches of God teach and practice to this day.

ABRIDGED LIST OF SCRIPTURALLY "CLEAN" FOODS:

[see Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14]

MEAT:

They chew the cud & have a divided hoof:
Beef
Antelope
Elk
Buffalo
Lamb
Deer
Goat

FISH:

They must have both fins and scales:
Cod
Haddock
Mackerel
Salmon
Bream
Tuna

FOWL:

Chicken
Turkey
Quail
Pheasant
Goose
Grouse
Duck
Dove (and related)

INSECTS:

Those listed in Scripture are not readily identified today But you could, as John the Baptist, try locusts!
[see Leviticus 11:20-23]

Published by:
The Churches of God Outreach Ministries
PO Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621
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