



Thoughtful eating

Food, relationships and the environment
from a biblical perspective

Summary

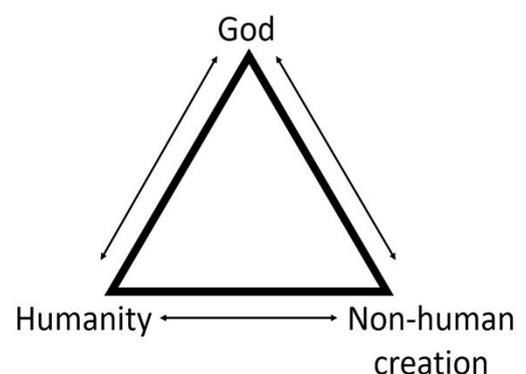
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Introduction

There is increasing media and cultural interest in the environmental and social impact of global food systems, which are responsible for seriously damaging the environment in a number of ways. Large scale dietary changes and more sustainable food systems have been proposed as potential solutions. We suggest that a more holistic and relational vision of food and eating is needed. This paper examines the connections between food, relationships and the environment and develops a biblical vision for thoughtful eating centred around the themes of delighting and sharing. The illustration below of the 'triangle of relationships' between God, humanity and the non-human creation provides a key framework for the paper. This relational model visually presents the interconnected nature of the relationships, and also exemplifies the theocentric orientation of the Bible.

'The biblical metanarrative is all about the relationship between God, human beings and the non-human creation.'
Richard Bauckham



1. To till and to tend: agriculture and the environment

All food production is reliant on, affects and is affected by the environment. The environmental impacts of global food systems have social consequences. A number of the key current (and future) impacts of food production are noted below.

| | Environmental impact | Social consequence |
|--|---|--|
| Biodiversity loss, pollution and soil degradation | Agricultural expansion is driving biodiversity loss through the destruction of habitats. Nitrogen and phosphorus fertilisers pollute waterways, while intensive agriculture and overgrazing degrade soil. | Biodiversity loss contributes to food insecurity through increased numbers of pests and risk of disease. Polluted 'dead zones' in waterways and degraded soil reduce agricultural yields. |
| Water and land use | The expansion of arable and livestock production has increased land and water usage. Livestock production is the most resource intensive: in the EU 63% of land is used to grow arable crops for livestock. Irrigation can contribute to the degradation of land by disrupting water tables, leading to salinisation. | Globally, many of the rural poor are reliant on ecosystems for subsistence and are most vulnerable to a lack of water supply. Land used to grow crops for livestock can result in valuable food being unavailable for those experiencing food poverty. |
| GHG emissions and climate change | Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from agriculture constitute almost a third of all global emissions. Livestock are responsible for 14.5% of global emissions. | Impacts of global climate change are well attested, as weather becomes more extreme and unpredictable, affecting biodiversity and food supply chains, and increasing the risk of flooding, pests and disease. |
| Food loss and waste | It is estimated that 33% of all food produced is lost or wasted, representing a misuse of the labour, water, energy, land and other natural resources that went into producing it. | Globally, 821 million people are undernourished. Such large scale food waste is fundamentally unjust. |

Two important social trends are currently increasing the environmental effects of food systems. Population growth drives increased food production and subsequent environmental degradation. Rising global wealth is associated with dietary patterns higher in meat and dairy consumption which have greater environmental impacts. Although in some respects population growth and rising wealth are positive, without systemic transformation of food systems and eating habits, these trends will exacerbate risks to people and planet.

2. Give us this day our daily bread: biblical analysis

Value of the environment

The Bible offers a view of creation that recognises that both humanity and the non-human creation were carefully crafted by God for his glory. Right relationships between human beings and the non-human creation require respect for the intrinsic worth of the environment. This requires recognition of the complicity individuals have in food systems that degrade the environment. Humanity's vocation 'to till and to tend' the land (Gen. 2:15) shows that faithful agriculture must care for God's creation, as well as contribute to sustainability for future generations. Modern approaches to conservation and agriculture,

which talk of 'ecosystem services' and 'natural capital', may suggest that the value of creation relates only to how it serves human interests. The biblical creation narrative challenges this: the plants, birds and animals are all created before humans and recognised as good independently of human interest (Genesis 1:25). Humanity is called to *delight* in creation as its Maker does; Psalm 148 exhorts trees, animals and people to praise God. Similarly, God challenges Job to consider his place in creation: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' (Job 38:4).

Food as gift

Food is, in the words of Norman Wirzba, 'God's love made nutritious and delicious, given for the good of each other'. Food is *delightful* but also life-sustaining and God's concern for creation is exemplified by his provision of all food.

'He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate -
bringing forth food from the earth:
wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.'
Psalm 104:14-15

Eating in the modern world has become decontextualised from the social and ecological contexts which make eating possible. As such, eating characterised by ingratitude and apathy fails to see beyond one's own plate. Joyful gratitude encourages *sharing* with others and developing sustainable food systems across the world. This is a way to love your neighbours, so that all people now and in the future can experience the joy of eating food as a gift from God.

Table fellowship

The act of eating together is common to all cultures and the importance of *sharing* food in fellowship is emphasised in the Bible. Jesus spent so much time eating and drinking with others he was accused of being a 'glutton and a drunkard' (Luke 7:34). Hospitality was an important Israelite and Ancient Near East tradition and is one way in which meals create and foster community. Jesus' eating and drinking with 'tax collectors and sinners' offended the Pharisees (Luke 5:30). By sharing meals with the social outcasts of his day, Jesus demonstrated his grace, which was inclusive and radically subversive. One of the most important practices of the early church was 'radically ordinary hospitality', breaking bread together in their homes. Sharing food today can reflect grace and community, because in a profound way meals are about relationships: they communicate hospitality, fellowship, honour, love - the sharing of life together.



3. Eating joyfully, relationally and sustainably: applications

Our vision for transformation sees food systems supporting human flourishing by aiming toward both environmental *sustainability* and social *justice*. Transforming food and eating encourages right and just relationships between God, humanity and the nonhuman creation. This must be a common goal for all levels of society.

Individuals

- **Thoughtful eating:** this includes contemplation, appreciation and gratitude – *delighting* in and *sharing* food. This acknowledges the connections individuals have to God, other people and creation through food. Simple habits to develop thoughtful eating include saying grace; eating together; eating slowly; and sharing meals at a table.

- **Dietary changes:** eating thoughtfully includes changing food habits. The most environmentally significant change to consider is reducing meat consumption. Although vegan and vegetarian diets have the least adverse environmental impacts, it is more practical for most people to adopt a 'flexitarian' diet in which meat consumption is reduced. A positive way of framing this is the concept of 'meat for celebrations' – eating higher quality meat, less often, for example on Sundays or at special occasions. This approach can contribute to environmental sustainability and increase *delight* in both an everyday diet and celebratory feasting.

- **Food waste:** this is environmentally unsustainable and socially unjust. 70% of food waste occurs at the household level, so reducing food waste is one of the most important actions individuals can take. Consider buying less food, taking the time to plan meals ahead of time, and storing and eating leftovers.

Businesses and organisations

- **Farming:** farmers are vital as 'stewards of the land'. The agricultural sector should move toward environmental sustainability, but this need not come at the expense of economic viability. Since meat consumption needs to be reduced, livestock production should prioritise quality rather than quantity. An 'eat less, eat better' narrative can be communicated to consumers to facilitate this.

- **Food waste:** it is vital for businesses and organisations to contribute to reducing food waste. Organisations which redistribute food surplus, such as FoodCloud,

offer logistical solutions.

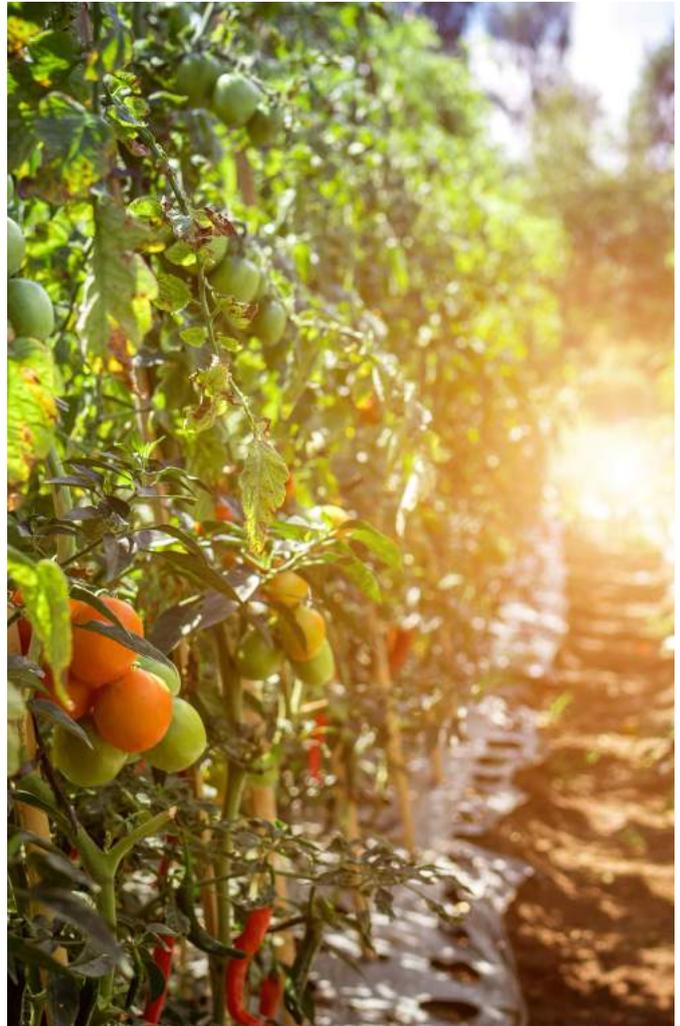
Policymakers

- **Supporting agriculture and farming:** government should prioritise supporting the agricultural sector in transitioning toward greater environmental sustainability. Subsidies should primarily reward good environmental practices, such as minimising soil disturbance, reducing chemical use, and improving on-farm biodiversity.

- **Land use:** as well as encouraging more sustainable farming practices, land use governance should also reflect environmental priorities. Recommendations include net zero expansion of agricultural land globally, and using more UK agricultural land for other purposes such as forests and conservation.

Conclusion

Although developing sustainable and just food systems may seem like a complex challenge, it can be addressed by the actions of individuals, organisations and governments working together toward this common goal. Doing so is imperative to restoring right relationships between God, humanity and the non-human creation.



About *Thoughtful Eating*

Eating is never a solitary act; each meal connects us to a food chain, precious resources, human labour and a global ecology. Given the growing environmental impacts and social consequences of today's agricultural practices, urgent action is needed. The new research publication, of which this is the summary, outlines biblical principles regarding food and proposes a framework for thoughtful eating - so that we can learn to eat joyfully, relationally and sustainably.

The full report, blogs, recipes, podcasts and more can be found at: jubilee-centre.org/thoughtful-eating

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About *Jubilee Centre*

The Jubilee Centre offers a biblical perspective on social, economic and political issues, and equips Christians to be salt and light in the public square. We believe the Bible describes a coherent vision for society that has enduring relevance for the UK and the world in the twenty-first century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships. We seek to study, disseminate and apply this vision in order to provide a positive response to the challenges faced by individuals, communities and policy makers.