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Towards a biblical mind

# ‘Better a meal of vegetables’

## Should we eat meat?

By Christopher Townsend

### Summary

Growing interest in plant-based diets, and rising numbers of vegans and vegetarians, prompt us to ask: should we eat meat? This paper argues that we are free to eat meat as a good gift from a generous God. However, in making dietary choices we should take into account theological, ethical and cultural developments in recent decades. These provide us with powerful reasons to eat meat from animals reared to high welfare standards and, furthermore, reasons to eat less meat.

### Introduction

Marco Pierre White, the celebrity chef, has announced that diners will soon be able to eat 3D-printed vegan ‘steaks’ at his restaurants in the UK. His move parallels comparable trends in more popular outlets: Britain’s largest bakery, Greggs, caused an immediate sensation when it launched its vegan sausage roll. Interest in plant-based diets has grown alongside a chorus of voices urging us to reduce our meat consumption. The ‘planetary health diet’ promoted by EAT-Lancet aims to feed a projected global population of nearly 10 billion and is introduced as follows: ‘Transformation to healthy diets by 2050 will require ... Global consumption of fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes ... to double, and consumption of foods such as red meat and sugar ... to be reduced by more than 50%.’ Such a diet would confer ‘both improved health and environment benefits.’<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the environmental argument has been at the forefront of the case for reducing meat consumption: ‘The best way to save the planet? Drop meat and dairy.’<sup>2</sup> A recent article in *The Sunday Times* suggested that the question ‘Should we eat meat?’ is the ‘dietary debate of our age’.<sup>3</sup>

### How should Christians respond?

The mainstream view in Christian theology and practice has been that there is no moral objection to the consumption of meat as God has declared to the human race from the time of Noah: ‘Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you.’<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, by the ministry of Jesus the food laws in the Old Testament were swept aside and all foods declared clean.<sup>5</sup> While some notable figures in Christian history (such as St Basil, John Wesley, William Booth) have commended a vegetarian diet, vegetarianism has never been a significant part of Christian theology or practice. In the early church and medieval era, asceticism was widely prized, monastic diets often excluded red meat, and the liturgical calendar required abstinence from animal produce during Lent and from meat on sundry days. Where the Reformation took root, these dietary practices were essentially dropped.

Against this backdrop, many Christians today would view decisions on whether to eat meat or not as largely a matter of

The question ‘Should we eat meat?’ is a luxury some are not in a position to ask.

1 See <[https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet\\_Commission\\_Summary\\_Report.pdf](https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet_Commission_Summary_Report.pdf)> [accessed 19 April 2022].

2 ‘The best way to save the planet’, *The Guardian*, 8 June 2018.

3 *The Sunday Times*, 27 February 2022.

4 Gen. 9:3.

5 Mark 7:19.



personal preference. The New Testament contains very little to suggest meat, as such, may not be eaten. The controversies over Jewish food laws concerned the *types* of meat which were admissible. Meat is no longer sacrificed to idols in the West, so (setting aside questions raised by the sale of *balal* meat) Paul's warnings against eating idol-meat *in some circumstances* are of limited relevance. If anything, the New Testament seems to raise questions about the desirability of vegetarianism: is it not the man whose 'faith is weak' who 'eats only vegetables'?<sup>6</sup> Indeed, advocacy of vegetarianism can be associated with ideological convictions, alternative religions, or forms of spirituality rightly viewed with suspicion by Christians.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, if these pitfalls can be avoided, and if experts, opinion-formers, and younger generations advocate a more plant-based diet, why not? Naturally, if some Christians adopt vegetarian diets, the church community must practise mutual consideration to maintain harmonious relationships, and its welcome and hospitality – at meals and after-church coffee – should accommodate the preferences of vegetarians.

The burden of this paper is that such an approach, along the lines set out in the previous paragraph, has become, if not misguided, at least superficial in the light of theological, ethical, and cultural developments in recent decades. Before we look into this claim, we consider a preliminary question.

### Do we need to eat meat?

There are some 600,000 vegans in the UK and a larger number of vegetarians.<sup>8</sup> So this question might seem redundant: surely, meat consumption cannot be viewed as a necessity? The answer, it turns out, is not quite so straightforward. From a physiological perspective, humans are omnivorous. From a health perspective, we need regular intake of vitamins B12 and D, calcium, iron, iodine, zinc, and polyunsaturated fats (omega 3 and 6). For vegans, the advice is: 'Appropriate supplementation is an important part of healthy vegan

nutrition.'<sup>9</sup> Even with supplements, owing to variations in our genes and microbiome, some will struggle on a vegan diet.<sup>10</sup> For vegetarians, a well-curated and broadly-based diet – including eggs and dairy – should contain sufficient quantities of these vital elements of nutrition.<sup>11</sup>

For many, however, such a diet may be impossible or impractical. The traditional Inuit diet in winter contains no plant matter. In parts of the globe, a subsistence farmer, living on marginal land, may need to herd goats to turn what humans cannot eat (grass and shrubs) into food his family *can* eat (milk and meat); meat may not be a substantial part of their diet yet represents the difference between survival and disaster. Meanwhile, in the West, some on low incomes find themselves in 'urban food deserts' where it is hard, or even impossible, to access a healthy diet and still less a healthy vegetarian diet. In short, the question 'Should we eat meat?' is a luxury some are not in a position to ask.

### Theological recovery

During recent decades, awareness of climate change, pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, has prompted considerable engagement with the Bible on environmental issues. While some readers have adopted a hermeneutical strategy of 'resistance' or 'revisionism' towards the biblical text, others have aimed at 'recovery' of the text.<sup>12</sup> Where the whole canon of Scripture is allowed to speak, including the broad sweep of the Old Testament, neglected passages and overlooked themes emerge.<sup>13</sup> Previous *Cambridge Papers* have argued that 'creation care' is an essential part of Christian discipleship, often linked to 'neighbour love', and this paper does not repeat those arguments.<sup>14</sup> Instead, our aim is to highlight certain features of the biblical account in relation to animals (including domesticated animals) and meat consumption.

### Animals

In Genesis 1, God draws a distinction between humanity, made in his image (Day 6), and the rest of creation (Days 1 to 6). When humanity arrives, creation is declared 'very good'; yet before that, it was already 'good'. Moreover, within what we call the 'natural environment', some prominence is given to animals or, rather, complex animals. Plant life, part of the 'habitat' formed for living creatures to fill, is given by God to humans and all creatures that have the 'breath of life' (vv.29–30). God arranges night and day, land and sea, sun and moon ('Let there be ...') but he speaks to human beings *and* to the creatures of the sea and air, saying 'Be fruitful and increase...' (vv.22, 28) and, after the flood, God covenants with Noah *and* 'all living creatures of every kind on the earth'.<sup>15</sup>

The unfolding scope of God's plan of salvation extends

6 Rom. 14:2.

7 Such as forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, New Age spirituality, or 'ecofeminism', or the radical, species-blind, utilitarianism promoted by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (1975).

8 For numbers of vegans, see: <<https://www.vegansociety.com/news/blog/how-much-progress-have-we-really-made-75-years>> [accessed 11 May 2022].

9 See: <<https://www.vegansociety.com/news/blog/VEG12021/do-vegans-need-supplement>> [accessed 18 April 2022].

10 R. Percival, *The Meat Paradox: Eating, Empathy and the Future of Meat* (Great Britain: Little, Brown, 2022), pp.14–15.

11 Supplements might still be considered: see <<https://vegsoc.org/lifestyle/a-summary-of-veggie-nutrition/>> [accessed 18 April 2022].

12 D.J. Moo & J.A. Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), pp.31–34.

13 R. Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), explores key passages and supporting material drawn from 24 OT books and 12 NT books.

14 R. White, *A burning issue: Christian care for the environment* (December 2006); D. Bookless, *Let everything that has breath praise the Lord: The Bible and biodiversity* (September 2014); A. Donovan, *Reducing disaster risk: creation care and neighbour love* (September 2021).

15 Gen. 9:16–17.

beyond the human race to all creation and the new creation is pictured as place of peace and harmony among living creatures.<sup>16</sup> Richard Bauckham argues from the exuberant language of Psalm 148 that all creation exists to praise God, and that when we recognise this, we will ‘abandon a purely instrumental view of nature’ and will no longer view the natural world as ‘mere material for human use’.<sup>17</sup> While Jesus makes it clear that a human being is of much greater value than animals, a Christian ethic of animals is distinctive ‘in its foundational recognition of other animals as fellow creatures of God’.<sup>19</sup>

At creation a distinction is made between livestock (*behemah*) and wild animals or ‘beasts of the earth’ (*bayyah ba’aretz*) which suggests that domesticated animals form part of God’s original intentions. After the Flood, when the creatures upon whom the ‘fear and dread’ of human beings falls are listed, livestock (*behemah*) are absent from an otherwise complete list of creatures, suggesting that domesticated animals are not potential enemies of humans but in a more collaborative relationship.<sup>20</sup> Both OT law and wisdom literature, while making provision for animal sacrifice, hunting, and eating meat, promote human concern for the welfare of animals – especially domesticated animals.<sup>21</sup> The practice of good animal husbandry by a shepherd supplies a key metaphor for divine love, kingly rule, and pastoral care. Today, we draw on that biblical metaphor to discuss spiritual leadership but rarely, if ever, consider its implicit standard for animal husbandry and critique of modern ‘intensive’ farming methods.

#### *Meat: an ambiguous gift*

It is God himself who first makes use of a slaughtered animal to benefit humankind, making garments of skin to clothe Adam and Eve to hide the shame of their nakedness.<sup>22</sup> However, only after the Flood does God tell the human race that animals may be eaten for food, and the context illuminates, nuances, and qualifies this gift.<sup>23</sup> First, this is a gift made to fallen humanity. It may be a concession to our fallenness, as several commentators argue; in any event, we must recognise our propensity to misuse, and abuse, God’s good gifts. Secondly, although God delivers living creatures into our hands, at the same time he covenants *with them*. Thirdly, the Bible’s permission to eat meat is given with a ‘peculiar hesitation’.<sup>24</sup> A limitation is laid down: ‘you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it.’<sup>25</sup> All life is to be valued or, as von Rad puts it: ‘Even when man slaughters and kills, he is to know that he

is touching something which, because it is life, is in a special manner God’s property.’<sup>26</sup>

Under Old Testament Israel’s sacrificial system, certain sacrifices were shared out between the portion for God, and those for the priests and for the worshipper together with his household/extended family.<sup>27</sup> Costly sacrifice, fellowship with God, and a special shared meal were, thus, all inextricably linked. Therefore, meat comes to be associated with God’s generous provision to sustain both the spiritual and the physical life of his people. In the Promised Land, a land of ‘milk and honey’ where animal produce nourishes and delights, the people are told: ‘you may slaughter your animals ... and eat as much of the meat as you want ... according to the blessing the LORD your God gives you.’<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, the Old Testament connects rejection of God with inordinate appetite for meat, folly and practical atheism with uncontrolled drinking and gluttonous meat consumption.<sup>29</sup> In the New Testament, during his time on earth, Jesus will have eaten meat at the Passover (as a law-observant Jew) and he ate fish, distributed fish to hungry crowds, and helped fishermen to fill their nets. Through his death, Christ is now our Passover lamb: the sacrificial system has gone and instead we recall his death by bread and wine.<sup>31</sup>

While a new era has dawned and we await the new creation, we live still within creation. Food reminds us that God has ordained that in creation the fabric of life depends upon our consuming creatures which are ‘living’ in a broad sense of that term. However, eating meat exhibits this pattern *par excellence*: our life is sustained through the death of a ‘living creature’. Herein lies a faint echo of the principle at the heart of Christianity: our life is sustained through the giving of another’s life. What of the age to come? Some Christians argue that vegetarianism can point towards our eschatological future, when pain, cruelty and death will be no more: ‘To be a Christian vegetarian is to see the world as it could be ... It is a very concrete way of practising a life of hope ...’<sup>32</sup> Yet, this same future is portrayed as a feast with ‘rich food, full of marrow’ (Isaiah 25:6, ESV). If a vegetarian diet can be said, in some sense, to anticipate the age to come, perhaps so too can dining on fine cuts of meat?

#### **Ethical developments**

In the New Testament the key issues revolved around the religious significance of certain types of meat *consumption*. When health implications are discussed, our concern is still with meat consumption: red meat has been linked with heart disease and certain cancer risks (though, interestingly, recent

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16 Col. 1:15–20; Isa. 11:6–9.

17 Ibid., p. 80.

18 Luke 12:6–7; Mark 5:9–13.

19 D. Clough, *On Animals: Vol. 2 – Theological Ethics* (London: T & T Clark, 2019), p. xii.

20 Gen. 9:2; see R. Bauckham, op. cit., p. 133.

21 Domesticated animals: Exod. 23:4–5, 12; Deut. 5:12–15, 22:4, 25:4; Prov. 12:10. Wild animals: Exod. 23:11.

22 Gen. 3:21.

23 Gen. 9:1–4. Humans might already have eaten animals before the Flood: the ‘violence’ on the earth which led God to destroy ‘all flesh’ (ESV) might have included violence in killing and eating animals (Gen. 6:11–13).

24 C. S. Aronson, ‘A Theology of Meat’, *First Things* (30 August 2019) <<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2019/08/a-theology-of-meat>> [accessed 8 December 2019].

25 Gen. 9:4.

26 Quoted in D. Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11: The Dawn of Creation* (Leicester, IVP: 1990), p. 159.

27 Lev. 7:11–36; Deut. 12:4–7, 17–19; Cf. 1 Chr. 29:21–22.

28 Deut. 12:15.

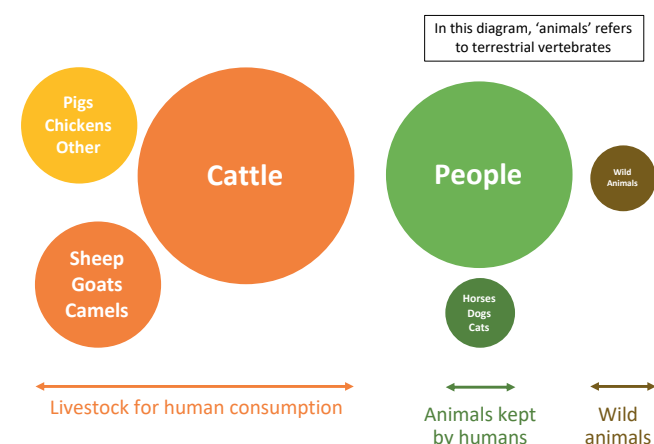
29 Num. 11; Prov. 23:20; Isa. 22:13.

30 Gal. 4:4; Heb. 4:15; Luke 5:1–7, 9:16, 24:42–43.

31 1 Cor. 5:7.

32 S.H. Webb, *Good Eating* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2001), p. 30.

research casts doubt on the dietary dogma that red meat is bad for our health).<sup>33</sup> However, to a great extent, today's discussions about eating meat are concerned with the practical and ethical implications of meat *production*. Indeed, for some Christians it is their assessment of the urgency and seriousness of these ethical considerations which may prompt a vegetarian diet.<sup>34</sup> Meat production has become significant – in part – because of its sheer scale. Globally, meat production has been rising since the 1960s: by 2018 the number of chickens slaughtered each year had increased nearly tenfold to over 68 billion; meanwhile, the numbers of pigs slaughtered has increased nearly fourfold and numbers of cattle nearly doubled.<sup>35</sup> The combined weight of animals (that is, terrestrial vertebrates) bred for food now dwarfs that of wild animals.<sup>36</sup>

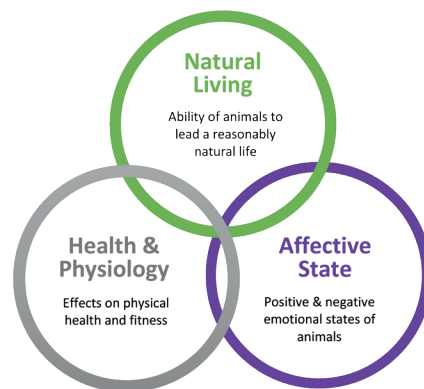


Furthermore, a large proportion of meat production is undertaken through ‘intensive’ farming methods involving the use of ‘confined animal feeding operations’ or, more colloquially, ‘factory farms’. In the UK, there are now about 800 livestock ‘mega-farms’.<sup>37</sup> The aim of intensive farming is increased production, increased efficiency, and reduced unit cost; an inevitable consequence is *systematic* adverse impact on animal welfare.<sup>38</sup>

Take chicken production: globally, over 70 per cent of chicken meat is produced using intensive methods.<sup>39</sup> The UK’s ‘mega-farms’ include seven poultry production units which can house over one million birds each.<sup>40</sup> Key welfare issues arise from fast growth, high stocking density, poor ventilation, and unsatisfactory broiler house management.<sup>41</sup> Fast-growing breeds, developed through genetic selection to reach slaughter weight quickly, with efficient feed conversion and large breast meat, can grow muscle too quickly for their

internal physiology to keep up. Welfare campaigners say: ‘secret filming at broiler farms ... has shown birds struggling to walk or collapsing under their own weight, or dying from heart failure.’<sup>42</sup> An intensively reared chicken has more room in the oven than in the barn.

The UK Government’s Animal Welfare Committee has analysed animal welfare through five animal freedoms,<sup>43</sup> which may be grouped into three overlapping areas:



Animal welfare standards are higher in the UK than in many countries, but minimum legal standards tend to focus on basic health and functioning and, to some extent, the affective state of animals. It is only at the highest welfare end of the spectrum that farm animals experience something like a natural – though still much curtailed – life. This can be seen from a simplified analysis of a selection of welfare standards to which pigs may be farmed in the UK:<sup>44</sup>

| Welfare Indicator             | Free Range/ Organic | RSPCA Assured | Outdoor Bred | Red Tractor | UK Legal Standard |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Pigs Outdoors                 | ✓                   | ✓             | ✓            | ✗           | ✗                 |
| No Cages                      | ✓                   | ✓             | ✓            | ✗           | ✗                 |
| Straw & Bedding for ‘Nesting’ | ✓                   | ✓             | ✓            | ✗           | ✗                 |
| No Tail Docking               | ✓                   | ✓             | ✓            | ✗           | ✗                 |
| Avoid overuse of antibiotics  | ✓                   | ✓             | ✓            | ✗           | ✗                 |

A yellow tick indicates partial fulfilment of the welfare indicator in question: see ‘Pork Labelling Guide’ at [www.farmsnotfactories.org](http://www.farmsnotfactories.org) for more detail.

There is a straightforward trade-off between production costs and higher welfare. Part of the problem for consumers is ‘obscure’ labelling: even a Red Tractor ‘Enhanced Welfare’ or RSPCA ‘Assured’ chicken could have spent its entire life indoors.<sup>45</sup> Last year, according to the British Poultry Council,

33 The health impact of red meat is influenced by complex interactions with overall diet (‘what else is on the plate’) and its nutritional quality affected in some respects by farming methods (organic or intensive): see R. Percival, *The Meat Paradox*, pp.10–13. For a recent study that questions advocacy on health grounds of a large reduction in meat consumption, see F. Leroy & N. Cofnas, ‘Should dietary guidelines recommend low red meat intake?’, *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*, 60:16 (2020), pp.2763–2772 (available at <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10408398.2019.1657063>> [accessed 12 May 2022]).

34 See, e.g., M. Smith, ‘The Plant-based Diet: A Christian Option?’ (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2019).

35 See <<https://ourworldindata.org/meat-production>> [accessed 11 May 2022].

36 This infographic is a modified, simplified version of the one found at National Food Strategy – The Plan, p.16 (available at <[www.nationalfoodstrategy.org](http://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org)>).

37 ‘Mega-farm’ is a journalist’s term for a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO): a US term for an intensive animal feeding operation in which over 1,000 ‘animal units’ – equivalent to 700 dairy cows, 1,000 meat cattle, 2,500 pigs

weighing more than 25 kg, 10,000 sheep, or 125,000 chickens – are confined for over 45 days a year.

38 For information on animal welfare on farms, see <<https://www.ciwf.org.uk/>>; for an alternative perspective, see <<https://weeatbalanced.com>>.

39 ‘Welfare sheet: Broiler chickens’, Compassion in World Farming (Updated 01.05.2013), p.1.

40 ‘UK has nearly 800 livestock mega farms, investigation reveals’, *The Guardian*, 17 July 2017.

41 ‘Welfare sheet: Broiler chickens’, *passim*.

42 ‘“Frankenchicken” at the centre of fight for animal welfare’, *The Guardian*, 16 April 2022.

43 D. Williams, ‘Animal Rights, Human Responsibilities?’ (Grove Booklets, 2008), p.17. <<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/farm-animal-welfare-committee-fawc>>

44 Based on analysis available at: <<https://farmsnotfactories.org/pork-labelling-guide>> [accessed 8 May 2022].

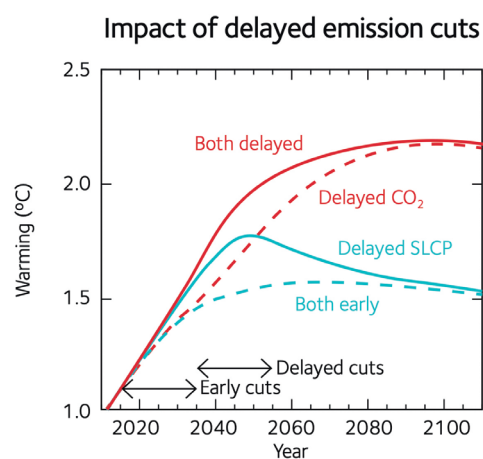
45 See <<https://betterchicken.org.uk>> [accessed 11 May 2022].

we ‘grew almost a billion birds, 95% indoors and 3.4% free range and 1% organic’.<sup>46</sup> In the supermarket, a medium-sized chicken sells for £3.50; fifty years ago, at constant prices, it would have cost about £11.<sup>47</sup> For many of us, the key challenge is a simple one: to eat higher welfare meat, and to do so less often. However, this will involve a few practical steps: to investigate where our meat – and fish, dairy, and eggs – come from; to decipher food labelling standards; to change our shopping basket; and to ask restaurants how their meat is sourced.<sup>48</sup>

But why eat meat less often? For some people, limited family budgets may mean this is the ‘price’ of eating ‘better’ meat. Meanwhile, the environmental dimension of higher welfare meat presents a mixed and complex picture. Such livestock can play a part in ‘regenerative farming’: manure improves soil quality and biodiversity and reduces dependence on chemical fertilisers. Livestock can and do graze on land unfit for arable use and, in the UK, play a part in forming the distinctive character of our landscape. However, from a global perspective, a switch to higher welfare meat does not address pressure on land use or climate change concerns.

In this context, beef cattle are often regarded as the farmyard villain. Demand for new pasture for cattle is by far the single largest cause of deforestation.<sup>49</sup> With a growing world population, demand for meat – including beef – will rise unless per capita consumption falls. Diet and its impact on land use is a complex topic but, to illustrate the possibilities, a recent modelling study found that if by 2050, 20 per cent of global beef consumption were replaced with a meat substitute (mycoprotein pioneered in the UK as Quorn), this would halve annual deforestation.<sup>50</sup> When it comes to emissions, cattle, along with rice paddy fields, are the main producers of methane in the agriculture sector.<sup>51</sup> Methane is a ‘greenhouse gas’ with unusual properties: it has a potent, but short-lived, ‘global warming’ effect; unlike CO<sub>2</sub> the average methane molecule remains in the atmosphere for only about 12 years.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, if overnight all ruminant farm animals were to vanish, within 12 years the methane in the atmosphere would start to fall, and there would be a net ‘cooling’ effect. In other words: ‘Cutting back on methane is ... one of the very few methods by which we could put a relatively sharp brake on climate change. This is why, in recent years, meat-eating has risen up the environmental agenda.’<sup>53</sup> Modelling at the University of Oxford suggests that early cuts in both CO<sub>2</sub> and ‘short-lived climate pollutants’ (SLCP), notably methane, could help keep global warming below 1.5°C.<sup>54</sup> However, if cuts in SLCP and CO<sub>2</sub> both occur, the speed of reduction in SLCP becomes immaterial in the long term; by contrast, since

CO<sub>2</sub> has a permanent, cumulative effect, a delay in cutting CO<sub>2</sub> results in global temperatures rising by an extra 0.5°C or more (see diagram below).<sup>55</sup> Over the longer term, it is far more important to cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.



We are all aware, given the mishaps in modelling the spread of Covid, that models need to be treated with caution! In coming years, the use of seaweed as a feed supplement for cattle could reduce their methane emissions.<sup>56</sup> However, the biggest *potential* carbon benefit of eating less meat – from sheep, goats and cattle – is the opportunity to repurpose land to sequester carbon, typically through reforestation.<sup>57</sup> It is too early to say whether lab-grown ‘cultured meat’ could form part of the solution or simply create new problems.<sup>58</sup> In conclusion, notwithstanding the complexities, on a prudent approach to our current climate situation, there remains a pretty good case to begin scaling back per capita meat consumption now ... and still more for carrying out an urgent review of one’s CO<sub>2</sub> footprint.

### Cultural changes

In every culture food has symbolical significance. ‘Food habits are a language through which a society expresses itself. ... the rituals concerning food have always played an important part in the life of human groups.’<sup>59</sup> Food practices may be used, for example, to provide a focus for communal activities, to demonstrate the nature and extent of social relationships, to manifest belonging to a group, to proclaim the separateness of a group, to signify social status or wealth, to display piety, to express moral sentiments, to express individuality, and much besides.<sup>60</sup> Our long-term cultural memory of meat-rich diets as emblematic of elite status gave way to a twentieth-century sense of meat as an ‘aspirational’ food (as in Herbert Hoover’s 1928 presidential campaign phrase ‘A chicken for

46 From article cited at footnote 40.

47 ‘The £3 chicken: how much should we actually be paying for the nation’s favourite meat?’, *The Guardian*, 24 November 2021.

48 Consumer choice can be supplemented with active citizenship: by supporting a charity that campaigns for higher animal welfare standards or by writing to supermarkets to press for ‘better’ options or to MPs to urge them not to undermine UK food standards through free trade deals which allow imports of ‘cheap’ meat with lower welfare standards.

49 See, e.g., ‘Deforestation linked to agriculture’ available on <<https://research.wri.org/gfr/forest-extent-indicators/deforestation-agriculture>> and ‘Drivers of Deforestation’ at <<https://ourworldindata.org/drivers-of-deforestation>> [both accessed 11 May 2022].

50 News item in *Nature* (4 May 2022) at <<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-01238-5>> [accessed 8 May 2022].

51 Ibid. However, to some extent, cattle have replaced, rather than added to, natural levels of methane production. In the USA, tens of millions of ruminants

(bison, elk, deer, caribou) once roamed the prairies (D. Rodgers & R. Wolf, *Sacred Cow: The Case for (Better) Meat* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2021), p.136.

52 National Food Strategy, p.76.

53 Ibid.

54 M. Allen, *Short-Lived Promise? The Science and Policy of Cumulative and Short-Lived Climate Pollutants* (Oxford Martin Policy Paper, 2015).

55 The diagram reproduces Figure Three from *ibid.*, p.15.

56 See <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/03/feeding-cows-seaweed-can-fight-methane-climate-change/>> [accessed 9 May 2022].

57 National Food Strategy, pp.92–93.

58 ‘Cultured meat may make climate change worse’ (19 February 2019) (See <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-47283162#comments>> [accessed 20 April 2022]).

59 V.E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to food in late antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.3.

60 Ibid.

every pot and a car in every garage'). Sociologists argue that meat consumption is associated with masculinity (Burger King once advertised the Texas Double Whopper with the slogan 'Eat Like a Man'). In *Meat: A Natural Symbol* Nick Fiddes argued that meat consumption symbolises, above all, human mastery over nature (with the result that the cruel and bloody aspect of meat is not a regrettable side effect but essential to its role).<sup>61</sup> Yet, there is a lighter and more joyful side to the cultural connotations of meat: feasting, community, and celebration. Indeed 'meat is *the* food for feasting'.<sup>62</sup> At Thanksgiving (in the USA) and Christmas Day (in the UK), families, and loved ones, celebrate with a once-a-year meal of roast turkey, with plenty – and more besides – for everyone at the table.

Vegetarians, no longer viewed as 'cranks', have moved into the cultural mainstream even if vegetarianism is often practised on an intermittent basis through Meat Free Mondays, Veganuary or 'flexitarianism'. What then might be the cultural significance of this trend? It is impossible to generalise but there are overtones of anxiety (fear for the future of the planet), a new morality (a meat-free diet as virtuous, responsible, compassionate), identity formation (an expression, or chosen articulation, of belief and identity), and spiritual significance (the language of 'clean eating' hints at purification). In *The Meat Paradox*, Rob Percival notes that despite the growing prominence of vegetarianism, there is no clear evidence that meat consumption per capita is falling in the UK.<sup>63</sup> Surveys reveal that some people may identify as vegan or vegetarian when – in fact – their actual diet does not match that self-description: 'perceived behaviour change' may contribute to an improved self-image.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, others may deal with the dissonance created by perceived moral ambiguities in meat consumption by being more entrenched, and more assertive, in their meat consumption.<sup>65</sup> This brief sketch suggests a number of challenges for Christians: to articulate hope for the future of the planet in God's sovereign hands; to engage with vegans in ways that help them to understand different dietary choices practised by Christians; and to act with integrity – rather than hypocrisy or self-deception – when we make and express our decisions over diet.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that we are free to eat meat as a good gift from a generous God. Nonetheless, recovery of a biblical framework for our relationship with non-human animals, and serious attention to our current context, will give us powerful reasons to eat meat from animals reared to high welfare standards and, furthermore, reasons to eat less meat. If anything, this is all the more relevant in a cultural environment in which dietary choices are beginning to form part of society's informal dialogue about how to lead a virtuous life and where dietary choices may be an element in the formation of a personal or social identity. When our society considers food, the paradigm is often food as fuel (focusing on nutrition, cost, and convenience) or pleasure (new recipes, exotic flavours, and celebrity chefs). The debate over whether we should eat meat has introduced an ethical, and a new cultural, dimension to questions of diet. However, for Christians, there is a much richer discussion to be had about our relationship with food: a discussion about the place of food in our relationship with God (which opens up a conversation about gratitude, humble dependence, avoiding gluttony in its various guises, and the place of fasting) and our relationships with one another (which opens up a conversation about social life within the family and beyond, nurturing community, generosity, hospitality and even mission).<sup>66</sup> So, we close with the words of John Ball, a seventeenth-century nonconformist curate, who declared, 'when we sit downe to meate, we come to a lively sermon of God's bountie and love.'<sup>67</sup>



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61 N. Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (London: Routledge, 1991).

62 M. Zaraska, *Meatbooked: The history and science of our 2.5-million-year obsession with meat* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2016), p.106.

63 R. Percival, op. cit., pp.131–35.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 The phrase 'better a meal of vegetables' is from Prov. 15:17 (NIV, 1984) which underlines the priority of relationships of love.

67 E. Barnett, 'Reforming Food and Eating in Protestant England, c.1560 – c.1640', *The Historical Journal*, vol 63:3, (2020), 507–27 at p.521. Here 'meate' refers to 'food' generally.

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