

4

Discipleship's Demand

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IS FOLLOWING the way of Jesus. But this does not take place just at an individual human belief level, nor even that of a local community of like-minded people, but at a visionary level of actively participating in Jesus' vision for the world.

That vision is always rooted in a contemporaneous society. That vision is rooted in Jesus' Jewish background and the world of the Hebrew Bible. For Jesus' present-day followers, that vision is also mediated through the writings of the New Testament from the early Christian era. Since then, that vision has been enhanced, sometimes compromised or diluted, and sometimes corrupted by the teaching and the practice of the intervening church.

So what has all this to say about the way we eat, together and alone, as Christian believers?

Wherever we are, and whatever our faith, the nature of our diet is determined by what can be grown or bought in the locus of our daily lives. The Christian in northern Australia or Indonesia, with their plentiful fresh fruits and fertile gardens, can live more of a self-sufficient life than those in Britain or Canada and the northern-border US states.

As Christian believers, what we do and how we use locally grown food has been and should be shaped by our faith and personal discipleship. The Inuit and Indian Christian will have very different ingredients but what they do with their food must be shaped by their Christian vision. Those of us who live in societies and locations between those "extremes," with perhaps more food opportunities, have even greater responsibility in our dietary choices.

This is not simply a matter of faith but ethical philosophy, too. However, if “Jesus is Lord” for Christians, then all other things become subservient to that; even the best philanthropic ethics have to be matched or even bettered by our practice as Christians.

I have seen private video footage of Desmond Tutu, when archbishop, exhorting all his listeners in “black townships,” not just Christians, to share their bread so that they could survive and struggle together against apartheid. They did—successfully.

Aung San Suu Kyi, a Buddhist and the leader of Burma’s National League for Democracy, is often print-reported, or heard in broadcast interviews, referring to her childhood when her mother demanded she cleared her plate of all food she had taken, because others in their country needed food—nothing should be wasted.

When two such world leaders in their respective struggles for freedom and democracy understand and advocate the importance of food ethics, the practice of Christians in the “free world” needs to be just as vigilant or better.

However, Christianity began in the Middle East, when an itinerant Jewish teacher and healer named Jesus called people to celebrate daily a new way of living. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead and talked of his Father in heaven set him apart from other radical prophets. Over two thousand years of history since has seen his followers declare him to be the Son of God and the second person of the triune God; those followers were pejoratively called Christians at Antioch in the first century AD. What must never be lost is that Jesus’ life and societal background was in the Hebrew tradition.

The Hebrew Tradition

The first five books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament are known as the Pentateuch or the “Books of the Law.” Within them, the outlines of Jewish dietary law are defined, but these have been refined and clarified by over two thousand years of rabbinic teaching and tradition.

Basically, Jewish Law prevents its adherents from eating “unclean animals,” such as pigs and shellfish. It also demands that things are properly prepared in a particular ritualized manner commonly known as kosher. Within that kosher practice, there are demands that animals are slaughtered without pre-stunning, by slitting their throats and allowing them to

“bleed out,” after a particular prayer has been said over each such animal. This is known as *shechita*. Islam follows a similar practice, known as *halal*.

But Jewish Law also forbids the cooking of meat and milk products in the same kitchen or with the same utensils. In twenty-first-century homes, this means either two separate kitchens or a kitchen with each half having separate sinks, utensils, and cooking facilities. This creates a great sense of family community as adult children have to go on living with their parents, while acquiring sufficient wealth to afford such lavishly equipped homes of their own.

This no-milk-and-meat-together rule obviously has implications for wider socializing. In large US and British cities, there are restaurants run by Jewish families, observing kosher demands. Recently, my partner and I stayed in a vegetarian guesthouse in North Wales where the only other two guests were a husband-and-wife team of rabbis from southern England. We shared much animated and happy conversation about “Jewish diets,” as they helpfully explained that vegetarian households will not have nonkosher forbidden foods and their kitchens would never be used for the preparation of meat-based meals.

But central to Jewish tradition and community is the practice of “eating together.” This is exemplified in the Friday night meal, *Shabbat*, when Jewish families gather with acquaintances and relive the Passover narrative in a multivoiced celebration meal. When I was a high school student, I had the privilege of several invitations, which I accepted, to that eve start-of-Sabbath meal. The very fact that a Gentile Christian was welcomed and fed taught me much.

Although it is an ongoing thread throughout the Hebrew Bible, it is perhaps the book of Ruth whose narrative is most important in underpinning the Hebrew concept of care and provision for “the widow, the orphan, and the stranger” (Deut 10:18). In this story of loss, loyalty, and love, Naomi knew that her kinsman, Boaz, would not harvest to the very edge of the fields so that the passing widows, orphans, and strangers, such as Ruth, could glean and thus have corn. God’s promise to Israel in the wilderness was that they would be taken to “a land flowing with milk and honey”—two signs of plenty (Exod 3:8, NIV). In their worship, Israel would have known the psalm of David which sings, “You have prepared a rich table for me” (Ps 23:5, author’s translation). The provision that God makes for all his people is celebrated by the lifestyle of sharing commanded of the Hebrew people.

That hospitality goes back about three thousand years to desert tribes as they came together to form the people we call Israel and Judah. That

confederation of people, throughout their suppression and struggles, has continued to celebrate their identity which their daily diet- and food-based rituals help to emphasize.

Middle Eastern Origins

Just like Christianity, both Judaism and Islam originate from the Middle East. It is hardly surprising that both these great world faiths have strong traditions of hospitality to both friend and stranger.

In today's world of mechanized transport, the desert tradition is still to give hospitality to others, even strangers. That was even more necessary in biblical times of desert travel on foot or by camel. The tradition of hospitality lives in this generation across all the shores, nations, and islands of the eastern Mediterranean—the area commonly known as the Levant.

It is no accident that the word “companion” is drawn from Roman Latin, meaning the “one with whom you share bread.” It was these same Romans who occupied the land of Jesus' earthly birth. Bread-sharing was the culture of both the wealthy and the peasantry, of both the occupying forces and the suppressed. The occupying force in the Palestine of Jesus' day spoke Latin, which had that “companion” word for the “sharer of bread,” which underpins the common nature of the practice itself.

Many modern Christian hymns and songs sing of hospitality, journey, common pilgrimage, the sharing of bread, and being “companions on the road.” The very nature of Christian discipleship is rooted in the Hebrew and Middle Eastern traditions, which regard that companion nature of bread-sharing as central in the pursuance of faith.

The Jesus Tradition

It was into such a world that the Jesus of the Christians was born. Ray Bakke, the urban missiologist, often makes the point that Jesus, having been born into the humblest of Middle Eastern beginnings, spent his early childhood as a refugee in North Africa.¹ Perhaps, now that Africa is the continent with the greatest proportion of refugees, that aspect of Jesus' incarnation needs to take on a more important emphasis for his followers.

In terms of this book, it points to the fact that Jesus in his life was part of that world that relied on the welcome, hospitality, and provision

1. Bakke, *Urban Christian*.

of others for survival. Clearly, as homeless refugees, Jesus' earthly family was not left to starve in the north African dust of Egypt. What are we saying about the twenty-first-century global Christian community if we are content to let the homeless—who will include the widow, the orphan, and the stranger—starve in the North African dust or anywhere else? By logical and biblical thinking, that same principle applies to whomever, in whatever nation. Discipleship makes its demands upon us as part of the global community.

“When I Was Hungry . . .”

Jesus himself makes this same point to his own followers (Matt 25:35), arguing that in feeding whoever is hungry, we need to respond to them as we would to Jesus himself. In our attitude to the world's hunger and our daily diet of many free choices, do we shop, grow, and eat that “the world might have life” (John 10:10)? The evidence is further stacked against us with the death of each and every starving person on this planet.

“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread . . .”

Some years ago, I visited an aid project in a very unfashionable and poor country in Eastern Europe, where two local churches were setting up an orphanage in an abandoned building. We had driven with a truckload of goods, toys, furniture, and medicines across Europe. We needed to take turns sleeping in the cab as others among us drove to avoid stopping for long periods when we would become sitting targets for hijackers, desperate for the material goods and drugs we were carrying. We had taken camp beds too and we slept in an unheated, sub-zero attic when we arrived. The pastor of the local church killed one of the village's last pigs to celebrate our arrival. As I preached among his congregation, the next Sunday, there was huge poignancy and meaning as we responded together in saying the Lord's Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread . . .” Sharing the daily bread of those who could ill afford to feed us, told of the huge onward responsibility each of us Brits had on our return. Your reading of these words and the consequent challenge to your thinking and lifestyle is part of that responsibility. I have written, you have read—what difference will it make?

The Feeding of the Multitude

Very few incidents are captured in all the four portraits of Jesus' life, which the church calls the Gospels. The very word "gospel" means good news. The fact that every version of that written good news contains a scenario in which Jesus takes a small visible amount of food, prays over it, and then feeds four or five thousand people, is important. Whether Christians believe a miracle took place or believe this prompted everyone else to share their hidden lunch boxes is immaterial to my argument here.

What this "feeding narrative" demonstrates is that Jesus challenged the skepticism and suppositions of (at least) the disciples that "we have not enough food" and ensured there was enough to go around. Likewise, in today's world, we have to follow Jesus' injunction, utilizing whatever little we have for the benefit of the many. In meeting the needs of the hungry, whether short- or long-term, we have to acknowledge the example of this "feeding narrative," that everyone accepted a common diet of "loaves and fishes."

In today's world, Charles Elliott's advocacy is entirely consistent with that—except now it is the world accepting the 1960s diet of Chinese peasantry rather than "loaves and fishes."

The "Sharer of Bread"

Jesus was a great "sharer of bread." He so often visited the home of his friend, Lazarus, at Bethany, that Lazarus' sister Martha complained that their sister Mary sat listening to Jesus, while she (Martha) did all the work (Luke 10:40). In that context, "the work" would have been preparing the main evening meal for them as well as for Jesus and his traveling followers.

Perhaps one of the first Bible stories children learn is about Zacchaeus, the collaborating tax collector (Luke 19). Zacchaeus begins his rehabilitation by redistributing his ill-gotten wealth and Jesus eating with him—a sign of human reaffirmation that rejects any previous ostracism.

Jesus was often criticized as "one who eats with tax-gatherers and sinners" (Matt 9:10). Eating with others was a declaration of Jesus' kingdom—one in which all are welcomed. As a child I remember standing in a queue in the post office with my grandfather, when a neighbor criticized him for inviting some of the first black immigrants to their city back for Sunday lunch. I recall my grandfather booming out his response, "It is what Jesus would do, and so we do it too . . . brother!"

Elsewhere, I have written: “Food, and its sharing, seems central to Jesus’ own ways and his revealing of the kingdom of God, in word, deed, and prayer. If being a disciple is to follow the way of Jesus, there is a significant pattern of sharing food, across the boundaries of society.”²

Faith from a Table

It has become a theme of much helpful, recent feminist theology that Christian discipleship is shaped by a table. We can all acknowledge the Western notion underlying that—not everyone eats at tables. But the nature of Christian faith is often defined by how Jesus shared a Passover meal (a Jewish necessity) with his close followers on the night that he was betrayed prior to his torture and execution.

The task of this book is not to examine the style of that meal or its relative emphases for all Christian movements since then. However, this book aligns itself with the feminist thought that declares the community of that table, receiving the gift of another’s hospitality in provision of a meal and a borrowed room, to be decisively indicative of life within the Jesus community then and now. In world terms, if you are reading this book, you are one of those whose mind, hands, and pockets can ensure there are tables provided for everyone in this world. Christine Pohl, an ethics professor, wrote: “Recovering a rich and life giving practice requires attention to good stories, wise mentors, and hard questions.”³ Are you willing to be part of the answer?

“Jesus models that ‘communities of faith’ must be open to sharing all that they have, however little, to reveal God’s abundance. Whether a group is a community (or not) can perhaps be more easily determined by its use of resources in times of hardship and little, than it can in days of peace and plenty.”⁴ What a personal challenge when we know one seventh of the world’s population daily faces hardship and little! Last year, I led a food-sharing seminar for some American college students. Nearly all wore wristbands, asking, “What would Jesus do?”—the equally important question is what they would now do as Jesus’ followers. A year on, I wonder if they still give any thought to the implications of the nature of Jesus’ diet for them.

2. Francis, *Hospitality and Community*, 12.

3. Pohl, *Making Room*, 14.

4. Francis, *Hospitality and Community*, 11.

A Christian Movement

After Jesus' death and resurrection, a movement of his followers gradually cohered. By the time of the third century, groups of solitary desert monks met weekly for Sunday worship and to eat together. That pattern was replicated throughout the European Celtic tradition and later in medieval monasticism.⁵ Thanksgiving in the USA is rooted in the shared harvest meal of the "Pilgrim Fathers" and their families, celebrating God's provision for them as the first white settlers in a new land. Nowadays, sharing distinctive ethnic meals with US African American, Hispanic, Amish, or Mennonite Christians speaks of a pattern of sharing food as a natural expression of their corporate discipleship.⁶ What we can begin to recognize is that there is a "Jesus-shaping" to the sharing of food, which ensures there is food for all and not just a few.

All this finds its roots in Jesus and the earliest Christian communities. The Acts of the Apostles records that the first Christian communities used to "meet together daily, for the apostles' teaching, to eat together, sharing all that they had" (2:42, author's translation). The point here is that right from the first post-earthly-Jesus days, Christian disciples were committed to sharing all that they had. Secular Roman literature commonly records this distinctive aspect of Jesus' lifestyle. Today I often end "food-sharing seminars" with this question: "If you were arrested for your Christian lifestyle, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

The New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews, sent to some of the scattered groups of Jewish believers, states: "Do not forget to welcome and feed strangers, for by doing this you may have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2, author's translation). Often in the UK's Mennonite Trust, we are asked to provide a meal for a group visiting close to one of our network of households. I enjoy cooking for such folks, providing good wholesome food and home-made bread in ways that demonstrate our care for the planet and its peoples.

Every time I buy fair-traded tea, coffee, rice, bananas, and so on, I am by extension welcoming those food producers, who are strangers to me, to share my life and wealth. As with every other financial supporter of international aid agencies, my money spent this way may "entertain" some starving peasant family to a life-saving pot of mealie-porridge; they are my

5. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*.

6. Francis, *How Then Shall We Eat?* 25.

brothers and sisters just as much as we all share the task of being God's messengers—angels!

In that fantastic sixty-sixth book of the Bible, Revelation, there is a clarion call: “Here I am—I stand at your door knocking. If anyone hears me and opens the door, I will come in and we can eat together” (3:20). Are you hearing the voice of Jesus? Ensuring there is food to eat is central to the Jesus community. That community is impaired if not shamed by the fact that there are those who will never hear that voice except by our gift and provision. That will demand changing our lifestyles and our understanding of generosity and wealth.

Having Dominion

From the creation narratives onwards, throughout the Pentateuch, a theme threads its way concerning humankind's dominion over the rest of the created order. So often, this has been wrongly used to justify the rape of this planet, wrongful subjugation of its creatures and to create an arrogant individualism that presumes God will never allow humankind to run out of what it needs to survive.

Bob Dylan, the songwriter, included a song entitled “Man Gave Names to All the Animals” on his 1979 *Slow Train Coming* album that actually showed the lie of such wrongful interpretation. In that song, he explained how it was humankind who gave each kind of creature both its name and its importance within God's created order. Having done that, humankind is responsible for their care and respect. That in simple terms is exactly what “dominion” is.

There are three key words—respect, care, and stewardship.

- Respect: When I tend (note the verb) my garden, I have to ensure that I rotate my crops, enrich the soil, and plant my seeds in due order, thus respecting the natural order of a growing creation. When I worked as a veterinary wrangler, the way you handled a tiger or a domestic cat demanded similar skills but different distances and strength to respect the relative powers of teeth and claws.
- Care: In growing many of our vegetables, I take care when picking out fragile seedlings or take care if any of my smoking acquaintances offers to help with the tomato harvest—nicotine damages tomato plants. When looking after our folks' chickens, I take care to ensure that they

have shade on sunny days and are locked away by dusk so they are not easy prey for our neighborhood's foxes.

- Stewardship: I collect as much rain as possible in water butts to irrigate our crops—saving me money on my water bills, which I can then use for something else. If we make too much jam or pickle, we swap it with our local friends and neighbors or sell it at charity markets. We have to realize when a chicken is past its egg-laying life; then we feed it up well so it can feed us well too.

If we apply those terms to our food:

- Respect: Do you respect the need for animals to live lives encountering fresh air and pasture rather than the confines of crated intensive production? Do you respect the producers of your exotic goods (e.g., rice, tea, coffee, bananas, and citrus fruits) as brothers and sisters to insist they are paid a proper and fair price for their goods?
- Care: Do you care how your meat was slaughtered? Do you care how much nonstandardized fruit and vegetables your supermarket buyers consign to landfill?
- Stewardship: Do we allow our kids and even ourselves to leave food on our plates? How much food do we overbuy then waste? Are we good stewards of the land which is entrusted to us as owners and tenants?

If you have had any moment of hesitancy over these questions, you need to think again, then read on, helping yourself to work out how to change things.

We can apply this to a much bigger planetary canvas.

- Respect: If we truly believe that God is both our and the world's Creator, what are we saying about our faith if we act as though that which God has given can be abused for our own selfishness? To be explicit, we live in God's world, where there is enough for all unless a privileged few succumb to the sin of greed. If you are reading this book, you are one of those, as the Hebrew prophet put it, "living amongst those with unclean lips" (Isa 6:5).
- Care: This is about educating ourselves, our community and our nation to exercise proper care over the world's resources. This will mean not demanding so much burning of fossil fuels (think of personal and

food transport as well as the way we heat our homes), which then damages the ozone layer, creating global warming, and on it goes.

- Stewardship: This is an extension of our understanding of global care as it is reflected in our commitment to the equitable use of the world's resources. The biblical word is "stewardship," in all its facets. It means sharing what we have. For Christians, it is listening to Jesus' words: "If anyone has two coats, let him give one away."

Having dominion is just as much about how much we keep in our wardrobes or how many vehicles are in our garage as how much food we waste from our pantries and freezers as well as where and how that food is sourced.

What Does Biblical Stewardship Mean?

The preceding sections can start to give pointers to us about the nature of biblical stewardship. It needs to begin with a balanced reading of Scripture and prayerful discussion within an outward-looking group of believers, who can trust each other enough to work through their arguments, politics, and differences.

Perversely, before the big questions can be wrestled with, some small steps need to be taken.

- Can that discipleship group always discuss things after sharing an everyday meal and the necessary tasks of preparing it?
- Have we enough trust in those friends and acquaintances to hear that we might be wrong?
- Are we prepared to recognize that the high school student might have better researched the facts than the pastor in this multivoiced conversation?
- Are we prepared to undertake the reading or make the lifestyle and shopping changes or even grow more of our own food?

While we may not be able to do much more than exercise our voices and votes, buy less imported food or drive fewer miles, we need to consider

7. Murray Williams, *Multi-Voiced Worship*.

the big picture.⁸ The facts of global warming and how we share life⁹ as well as changing global economic patterns¹⁰ need to become part of our discussion's agenda at some stage—but these cannot be explored properly in this volume. Biblical stewardship cannot be divorced from the world. In seriously thinking about these issues, it may well challenge the way we think about God.¹¹

Biblical stewardship means being able to recognize wrongful patterns of “dominion.” For visitors to mainland Europe, it means recognizing the destruction necessary for the artificial creation of pre-Revolution formal gardens at Versailles, Vaux-le-Vicomte, and elsewhere in the style of Le-Notre and his students. Similarly, visitors to Britain can see an equivalent reshaping of natural landscapes by Capability Brown at many of its so-called stately homes. Zoological students can recognize the shift in attitudes of, for example, the five zoos and aquarium of the New York Zoological Society, from the poor dominion “stamp collection” model of solo and pairs of animals to the present-day, much better, dominion practice of keeping familial breeding groups by a seriously minded conservation body.¹² Equally, we need to repent of how much Christian wealth, either side of the Atlantic, was built upon the trade and labor of black slaves as well as repenting of the “transport” and harsh treatment of convicts exiled to Australia. Our past is full of wrong dominion.

Therefore, we need to be significantly objective in our study, our discussion and our lifestyle changes to create better patterns in our biblical stewardship today. No longer can North Americans and Brits live as though we have three and two planets' resources respectively to sustain our lifestyle. No longer can we leave half our dinner on the plate while the homeless of our cities raid the bins behind the restaurant. But the starving and significantly poor seventh of our world cannot raid our bins; they can rely only on hope that we can and will change the order of things. That means some new thinking in the biblical stewardship of our lives; seeing the world through God's eyes and reflecting upon the injustices we take for granted.¹³

8. Ward and Dubos, *One Earth*.

9. McFague, *Life Abundant*.

10. Daly and Cobb, *Common Good*.

11. McFague, *Models of God*.

12. Scheier, *New York City Zoos*.

13. Meadows, *Rich Thinking*.

A Christian Diet?

The point has already been made that we all have to eat. The question is, how? Then, what are the implications of our growing, shopping, and eating for *all* of our sisters and brothers across the world? It is no good for those of us in the northern hemisphere's snowbelt to spend all winter growing tomatoes and citrus fruit in hothouses, which add to the problems of global warming.

There can be little support to create a "Jesus diet," but Jesus' followers need to do everything in their power to create a "Jesus-shaped diet." What I mean is this: any thinking person realizes that Inuit, Australian, Minnesotan, British, and many other nationalities of Christians cannot create nor sensibly source the diet of a first-century Mediterranean peasant, such as Jesus. So, "the" or even "a" "Jesus diet" is not possible for the majority of world Christians today.

But every one of those world Christians can allow Jesus' values in his respect for the planet, his advocacy of "care for the neighbor," and his reliance on sharing food to shape the way we grow or produce, shop, then cook and share our food. Therefore, I can easily advocate that every world Christian must have a "Jesus-shaped diet."

There are those like Charles Elliott who will therefore rightly argue for a downsizing of our Western lifestyle, as previously described. I tried that diet for one Lenten season, only augmenting it with coffee, tea, and breakfast cereal—several of my proposed weekend guests postponed their visits until after Easter. But I did make many significant and lifelong changes to what I eat and what I feed my guests.

There are those like Stephen Webb who staunchly advocate that Christians move away from meat-eating and adopt vegetarian lifestyles.¹⁴ But while he acknowledges its benefits to the global community, his initial concern began from an animal rights "wrongful dominion" perspective.

There are those biblical scholars like John Dominic Crossan who excel in explaining Jesus' own non-exploitative omnivorous diet and itinerant lifestyle, rooted as it was in the first-century Galilean culture.¹⁵ But however much we wish to or could downshift, that lifestyle is no longer possible, even in twenty-first-century Israel and Palestine, with all its nuanced sophistications.

14. Webb, *Good Eating*.

15. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*.

PART TWO: THE NATURE OF OUR CHALLENGE

What we have to do is begin again. The next section of this book takes several wide-ranging issues—one per chapter—reflecting upon some of the concerns involved. They can only raise principles and issues involved. The responses that can be made will be diverse because your location matters. If you live in a city apartment or as a Florida snowbird or as a Scottish crofter or a Queensland permaculturalist or just in burbs with some usable backyard, your answers will be different.

SAMPLE